Teaching gender studies as cultural studies

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ABSTRACT This essay examines a moment of institutionalization in cultural studies, and argues that questions of gender have a significant place in this interdisciplinary domain. The issue is discussed in a pedagogic context that has almost normalized feminism, seeing its political contributions as belonging to the past. The essay argues that the conceptual conjuncture of culture and gender which has been central to feminist theorizing in India needs to be rethought. This conjuncture arose from thinking about culture in the framework of nationalism and the anti-colonial struggle, and the alignment of women with national culture. I discuss briefly the trajectory of how we have gone about investigating the culture-gender conjuncture, present a reformulation of what I think we’re up against, and introduce some new research projects which are trying to take this on board. The focus in these projects is on the question of translation, and how the issue of ‘regional’ languages poses a challenge to prevalent ideas in the women’s movement and in feminist teaching. The larger proposition is that we need to formulate curricula based on new kinds of research if we are to take feminism into the cultural studies classroom of the future.

My generation of scholars has been practising cultural studies, sometimes by other names, but now we inhabit the moment of institutionalization, and have to teach cultural studies in formal settings that will ensure the official certification of students and researchers. If pedagogy is a significant new site for the articulation of the praxis of this interdisciplinary domain, we have to work out the modalities by which we can ‘curricularize’ what we have been working on. In my case, the task is of teaching gender studies as cultural studies, and I want to argue here that this is a newly complicated business, one that throws up a host of challenges for the teacher as well as the researcher.

My paper revisits a conceptual conjuncture – that of culture and gender – that has been central to feminist theorizing in India. The women’s movement has engaged in various ways with the questions arising out of this conjuncture, whether it was in dealing with issues such as the Miss World Beauty Contest 1994 or the legal debate around the Uniform Civil Code in the mid-1990s or the 1998 controversy around the film Fire. An earlier instance of such engagement was the sati debate in the 1980s. Feminist scholarship, especially in literary studies and history, has discussed the formation of the female subject in India over the last century and a half, and elaborated how notions of normative femininity and masculinity were set in place.

I would like to suggest that our present moment poses a series of new questions to the articulation of gender-culture issues that has now entered into feminist commonsense. The challenge is most sharply visible in the space of pedagogy, where newer generations of women and men who do not necessarily acknowledge inheriting the struggles of the past are encountering the politics and the concepts generated by feminism. I will touch briefly on the trajectory of how we have gone about investigating the culture-gender conjuncture, present a reformulation of what I think we’re up against, and discuss some new research projects that are trying to take this on board. The larger proposition is that we need to formulate curricula based on new kinds of research if we are to
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Investigating the culture-gender conjuncture

It may not be inaccurate to say that the thematization of culture in gender theory in India draws on a critique of the nationalist project both pre- and post-Independence. In a range of writings spanning a variety of disciplinary locations (history, sociology, literary studies, art history, film studies) feminist scholars have engaged with and analysed the formation of normative femininity as it takes shape in the context of discussions about Indianness. Approaching the problem from a different direction, some scholars have investigated the formation of the normative citizen-subject in India, arguing that it is informed by debates on the woman question as well as by new embodiments of masculinity and femininity.

Feminist historical scholarship in particular (e.g. Recasting Women, Sangari and Vaid 1989) was able to show that the formulation of notions of culture in India were premised on woman, thus drawing renewed attention to the significance of the culture question under colonial rule. With culture understood here as a mark of distinctiveness and distinction in relation to the colonizing West, we also gained insights into how a historically specific way of thinking about Indian women came to be naturalised.

Feminist writing on more contemporary issues may not have directly addressed the culture question as such, but it is possible to look at some of the 1990s discussions, say about the religious community, or about caste, as referring implicitly to the culture question. An essay I wrote with Susie Tharu several years ago—‘Problems for a contemporary theory of gender’—tried to analyse the 1990s’ impasses of Indian feminism; the essay had argued that we needed to work through the challenges posed by issues of caste and religious identity, and that this could be done by investigating the composition of the feminist subject and her hidden hegemonic markings (Tharu and Niranjana 1996). If liberal nationalism sought to relegate religious identity and caste to the domain of culture (however ambivalent the relationship of nationalism/developmentalism was to ‘culture’), our essay argued that it was important for feminists to think otherwise. We suggested that acknowledging what had been called ‘cultural’ could complicate the liberal humanist notion of the rights-bearing individual, pointing to collective identities rather than singular ones. Thus, we see yet another sort of analysis of the culture–gender conjuncture, one suggesting that in confronting some of the questions related to what had come to be seen as ‘cultural’ we would eventually be able to interrogate the subject of feminism itself.

A related issue, not so much in feminist research but in the women’s movement, is the general ambiguity about the claim to the term feminism in India, and the tendency to use ‘women’ instead of ‘feminist’ whether strategically or otherwise. The implicit reason for this move seems to be the association of feminism with the West and the need to maintain a distance from what we have named as that cultural formation, sometimes for reasons of caste-class solidarities across the category ‘women’, the members of which have differential access to Western cultural and intellectual resources.

If we can now turn our attention from the making of gendered identities to the emergence of the culture question, we should take note of how this question is posed in the third world or more broadly non-Western societies as part of a colonial contestation: in India, for example, the term sanskriti translated as ‘culture’, is emblematic of a system of representation that calls ‘Indian culture’ into being. Here, the culture question is an intimate part of the formation of a national(ist) modernity, but culture in modernity tends to be represented as something that remains outside of modernity. This curious relationship between culture and modernity in the colonial context may give us some indication as to why women occupy the place they do in discussions about culture, when in normative Western feminist discourse the opposition is between
women and culture, with women being placed on the side of nature (John 1998).

The stakes are high, whether we are taking the historical perspective or looking at contemporary events or at the status of the feminist as critical thinker.

Feminism in Asia

Although my main references are to the Indian situation, I should reiterate that there are obvious similarities with other Asian settings when we think of the feminist stakes in the culture question. These stakes clearly involve issues both of political as well as symbolic representation. Kumari Jayawardena's classic work Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (1986) had argued that in the non-West these two movements share an intimate relationship. In parallel, the ‘culture question’ also becomes a ‘national culture question’, with significant implications for women. Although nationalist movements enable women’s political participation, they also create for them a fixed position in the symbolism of national(ized) culture. We can see examples of this in the production of the New Woman in Japan or Korea or India. A criticism routinely faced by feminists across Asia is that they are deracinated or alienated from ‘our culture’. Interestingly, this is not a charge levelled against any of our other political frameworks, which may also be far from having a clearly identifiable indigenous source. Feminist demands are allegedly demands arising from ‘modernization’, which is seen to erase ‘our’ culture and replace it with western values and ways of life. To begin to unravel the complex weave of this seemingly easy criticism, cultural studies has to have a theory of how notions of culture have been put together in our context.

One of our starting points would be to analyse how the creation of the national was based on the assertion of cultural difference from the West, and how women were frequently represented as the embodiment of that difference. The antithetical relationship between modernity and culture produced by nationalist discourse in the non-Western world implies also the alignment of women with the cultural and the authentic. Although in the Indian context this process has been investigated in detail in feminist scholarship, in the activist initiatives of the women’s movement the notion of culture often remains unexamined. My contention will be that it is the issue of translation – understood here in dimensions beyond the linguistic – that we need to address for a critical perspective on our feminist commonsense.

The translation problem

In this section I move between the inter-linguistic idea of translation and one that signals both derivation and an exceeding of the original context. Feminism as well as other political movements in India often depend on a conceptualization and initiation of political processes drawing on a vocabulary that is perpetually in translation. I am not suggesting that we are translating Enlightenment rationality, symbolized by a formerly colonial language, into a completely othered space. This formulation, familiar to us from a variety of disciplines, cannot account for the already-translated nature of our condition. I argue instead that the space of translation is one in which there is a simultaneous negotiation of different sorts of languages, conceptual as well as linguistic. If we can agree on this, it would mean that these languages configure the questions asked and the resolutions sought in our context. It would also mean that the languages converge and diverge at different times in different registers. While this is one level of the problem to be investigated, another level has to do with the unavailability of linguistic resources to understand this complex situation.

The language question in its many ramifications is something Indian intellectuals tend to deal with through endless deferral. For decades we have been admitting to the need to close the gap between social science vocabulary (which is largely in English) and the languages of cultural forms, practices, institutions. While small initiatives have been attempted, there has as yet been no large-scale multi-pronged conceptually-informed effort to tackle this problem. The
language issue has surfaced frequently in the women's movement of the last three decades. Urban activist groups of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, grappled with the task of thinking about the focus of their activism as well as their constituencies, since the latter often included less-privileged women from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Like several other issues which seemed divisive, the language question too remained unaddressed in the heady days of feminist activism.

In the last decade or more, however, minority women and dalit women in particular have been articulating their dissatisfaction with the subject-positions offered by Indian feminism. Interestingly, linguistic differences, often standing in for differences of other kinds, are also being foregrounded. There are increasingly larger and larger numbers of non-English-speaking women who see themselves as feminists and access feminist modes of analysis in the regional languages, having come to the women's movement through their involvement in other political and social movements or through literary debates in the different languages.

It is largely from here that the demand for translation is being raised, but one cannot accede to the demand simply by providing literal translations of material already available in English. Instead, the challenge would be to create a conceptual context in which the translation would have to take shape. Trying to meet such a challenge would force the feminist to reconceptualize her subjectivity as one formed in translation, and to realize how her questions and agendas are shaped and re-shaped continually in the space between languages.

To return to our discussion of the culture-gender conjuncture, it is evident that feminist criticism of 'our' culture often amounted to a denunciation of it in the name of modernity; to retain its critical edge, feminist politics had to sidestep the culture question (which also meant framing it only in the nationalist discourse). The leverage for this critique was provided by a universalist liberal humanism, which took shape through the apparatus of 'English'.

The contemporary challenge to 'English' in the women's movement, therefore, could be read as a challenge to that framework within which the culture-gender problem continues to be addressed. The irony here is that urban women's groups have seen 'culture' as a non-urban non-English problem, whereas I'm trying to argue that it is from that latter constituency that the real questioning of the culture-gender fit arises. The question arises not necessarily through direct problematization of the production of (Indian) culture as women's domain, but through the critique of English dominance and the demand for translation.

I want to argue for the recognition of translation as one of the most significant areas for intervention today, across all the disciplines. And since by definition cultural studies proceeds from a re-theorising of what culture has meant in the past (and therefore also from a re-theorising of the culture-gender conjuncture), cultural studies should be at the forefront of the development of a new theory of translation. It goes without saying that I don’t refer to translation simply as an activity of putting what is expressed in one language into another language, but an activity that has to perform self-consciously several levels of mediation. In our context, a good deal of conceptual work has been happening over the last century in the Indian languages even if not in a systematic fashion, and the creation of a shared critical vocabulary should now be at the forefront of our agendas for this century. No doubt there is much to learn from the history of North East Asian contexts in terms of how such vocabularies can be developed. The importance of the development and consolidation of critical vocabularies for the pedagogy of cultural studies can hardly be over-emphasized, especially since interdisciplinarity does not provide ready-made analytical protocols.

**Introduction to new projects**

Coming now to the question of pedagogy in relation to culture and gender, we should glance at the legacy of how we have been...
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asking the questions. Here I draw on my experience of teaching women's studies/gender studies as well as cultural studies in largely urban settings, where the language issue or the critique of English was not a central part of the context.

Feminism as an intellectual-political project and women's studies as a discipline have been central to the formation of cultural studies, as I have argued elsewhere (Niranjana 2007). While the question of culture has always occupied a significant place in the framing of the problems women's studies set out to address, the question of gender or even women is not always salient in the cultural studies classroom.

In the early 1990s, I was teaching women's studies as an optional course for humanities and social science students. The teaching was done in a stimulating atmosphere at a politically volatile time. We were carrying forward the legacy of the 1980s women's movement and participating in the ongoing political debates of the 1990s. Raising culture questions in the women's studies classroom was an exhilarating activity, and – as in many Asian contexts – formulating critiques of 'our culture' from a feminist perspective was a compelling task. But although women's studies attempted a cultural critique in the interests of women, there was an implicit universalism prodding us to an impatience or irritability with our specific contexts and their constraints.

With hindsight we can see that a tension remained: women's studies raised the question of culture, but tended also to see it as antithetical to modernity of which feminism was a part. When, therefore, the culture question begins to be asked in all its complexity – so that it becomes part of the investigation of our modernity rather than lying outside of it – there has to be a recompilation of the ways in which gender perspectives deal with culture. To do this we would first have to unravel some of the seeming successes of gender sensitization initiatives.

Both in the undergraduate and postgraduate humanities-social science classroom in India, we can witness the effects of the mainstreaming of gender questions made possible by (a) the activism of the women's movement; (b) the success of women's studies in the academy, and (c) the universalizing of rights issues post Second World War both by international agencies and by newly independent nation-states. The success of gender mainstreaming, however, can appear somewhat paradoxical. Students have begun to treat the analysis of certain crucial aspects of women’s subordination as self-evident and commonsensical, if not superficial. Familiarity with the issues raised by the women’s movement breeds boredom if not discontent. For a generation of women who have benefited from the struggles of the women’s movement, the social and political concerns of an earlier generation are being seen as outdated. The curricula that deal with feminist theory and the women’s movement acquire a jaded look for young people in colleges and universities disconnected from the history upon which the curricula draw.

We need to ask then what purchase the existing critiques of culture–gender formations have in the present. Is normative femininity as crucial an issue as it used to be for my generation? How do women today see their futures – do they see them as in any way constrained by the fact of their being women? If the answer to these two questions is in the negative, as I suspect it might be, then we would have to start looking for other entry points into the discussion of the culture–gender conjunctures. Not to be discounted also are the widespread critiques of secularism and modernity discourses, which are having an impact on thinking about gender issues.

Clearly, feminist scholarship has to engage in meaningful ways with the present-day histories of women and of gendering if it is to reinvigorate the classroom. One way in which we might be able to do this is to take on board a re-investigation of the culture–gender problematic, a re-investigation which I suggest could proceed by way of addressing the question of language and translation. Some of the projects I am currently associated with focus
specifically on the language of politics or on something quite different; that is, the politics of language. But taken together I believe they will help us look into the larger issue of translation – or *in-translatedness* – as I have tried to outline it in my previous section.

**Four new projects which set out to investigate in-translatedness**

Two of these projects are looking at masculinity, in Kerala and Karnataka respectively.

1. *Masculinity and the public sphere: understanding the language of feminist politics*

This project, undertaken by Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, examines two debates in the Indian state of Kerala which have been central to gender politics in recent times, and which could also be seen as marking the limits of feminist intervention. The first is the controversy around the ice-cream parlour sex racket case in Calicut, which came to public attention in 1997. The case had to do with young women customers of an ice-cream parlour who were lured into sex work involving prominent industrialists and politicians. When women’s groups exposed the issue, they gained a good deal of public support, which resulted in the resignation from public office of many of the men involved. However, there was a setback in 2005 when one of the women, who had been a key witness, changed her testimony, arguing that she had neither met the accused men nor been involved in sex work. The feminist debate that ensued depicted the woman either as a ‘fallen woman’ or as an ‘unknowing victim’, while she has consistently resisted both of these descriptions. The other debate also involves a feminist impasse related to sex work. The debate was sparked off by the 2004 publication of the autobiography of a sex worker, Nalini Jameela, who has been one of the leaders of the sex workers’ movement in Kerala. Confronted by Jameela’s refusal to be regarded as a victim of patriarchy, feminists have had to adopt moralistic positions in relation to issues of sexuality in general.

Radhakrishnan’s project is to understand the frameworks that inform the language of feminist politics in Kerala by re-examining important moments from the political history of Kerala, beginning with the 1930s and 1940s when the emergent Left discourse had discursively erased ‘gender’ and ‘caste’ by installing ‘class’ as the central problematic of progressive politics. Such a move also allowed for the construction of the regional identity of Kerala – one that is based on a developmentalist rhetoric. The language of class has remained unchallenged until recently when a new politics of gender and caste has animated the public domain in Kerala. Notions of masculinity and femininity are now understood in relation to a concept of patriarchy, which is seen to privilege one over the other. Radhakrishnan’s aim is to unravel the ways in which simple notions of the differences between men and women emerged during the period in question. The victim–predator logic put forward by feminists, which comes out of this period, continues to operate effectively in the present, informing a range of discourses from policy to politics to education. What Radhakrishnan’s work seeks to do is to draw attention (a) to the analytical problems involved in translating concepts like gender difference, and (b) to the political consequences of literal translation.

2. *Masculinity and the public sphere: linguistic masculinities*

The objective of this project undertaken by me is to investigate the hypervisibility of the language question in contemporary Karnataka in relation to formations of masculinity that are emerging in this rapidly globalizing Indian state. The starting point for the investigation is the kidnapping of the Kannada film star Rajkumar by a smuggler called Veerappan in 2000, an event that inspired new negotiations of the question of Kannada linguistic identity, of what being Kannadiga means today. The event of the kidnapping produced various kinds of popular arguments for new cultural agendas in relation to the Kannada language, often
seen as embodied in the star-presence of Rajkumar. A popular magazine headlining the kidnap story proclaimed that it was 'An axe-blow to the very existence of the language'. Why does the language issue appear so salient in the portrayal of an embattled Kannada identity in a way that is certainly different from assertions of Telugu or Malayalam identity? Why has Kannada linguistic pride often defined itself in opposition to and alongside Tamil pride? Attempts to find tentative answers to these questions would lead us into histories of cultural representation in Karnataka and into public sphere formation in southern India and the gendering of political language.

Apart from tabloid newspapers and audio-tapes, I also plan to look at the 1990s Kannada popular cinema spearheaded by the new star Upendra. The language of violence held in check by the public persona of Rajkumar achieves rearticulation in Upendra’s films, which literally enact the dismemberment of the body politic. One of the crucial ways in which the language of violence had been restrained – I suggest – is through the foregrounding of the language question as tied to Kannada identity, and the articulation of representational politics in the register of language. This mode of articulation remains viable as long as the post-Independence nation-state endorses linguistic identities through allowing for such structures of representation. As the nation-state’s functions change, and as its earlier forms of sovereignty (to do with the regulation of markets, for example) become eroded, the structure of address of the linguistic representation model founders. It is in this rapidly transforming space that the Kannada public sphere produces subjects gendered in new ways, subjects who are the perpetrators and targets of new forms of violence.

My project will pursue the language question into this realm to see if it retains its purchase on the politics of representation. If a singular linguistic identity (in this instance, Kannada) is no longer the axis for the articulation of masculinity, what do the new struggles around masculinity represent? What, for example, accounts for the ‘fan’ violence during Rajkumar’s recent funeral? The outcomes of this research project are expected to throw light on the interlocking issues related to gender and globalization, the state and representation, and the new structures of translation that are coming into existence.

3. Modernity, gender and the region

This is a project being carried out by P. Radhika, whose focus is on post-independence Karnataka. She suggests that while recent scholarship has shown the emergence of new gendered subjectivities and new notions of culture during colonialism, it is largely written from a national perspective. She argues that to introduce the concept of region into the equation would be to factor in how specific state formations impacted the constitution of gender and of culture. Radhika wants to focus on popular writing by women (she has in mind fiction, advice columns, and medical literature) as an ideal site to map the disjunctions between the citizen and the subject, arguing that such a mapping would help us understand better our contradictory and fraught modernity. She looks, for example, at women’s fiction from the 1960s, which was dismissed as sentimental and written within a patriarchal frame, suggesting that these terms are not helpful in understanding the complex negotiations in which the writers (and women of that period) were engaged. This complexity, I propose, is a mark of the difficult translations that the women were performing.

4. Knowledge, science and women in development discourses

This research project deals with a very different order of representation than the previous ones. The investigator, Asha Achuthan, is examining the location of women as negotiators with dominant knowledge systems. She directs her questions to reproductive health initiatives within development programmes in the Indian
context, looking specifically at the engagements of traditional birth attendants, or dais with the medical knowledge about reproduction.

The idea of development in India has provided, in the post-Independence decades, the legitimate framework for economic and social transformation. While political economy and sociology provide the main disciplinary tools that endorse development rhetoric, a closer look at the terminology might reveal that mainstream development practice is underpinned by the language and practice of modern western science. In this frame, Achuthan argues, questions of context become mere empirical facts, and are not seen as constitutive of the object of knowledge. The problem can be seen most visibly in the ‘women’s question in development’, where the (non-Western) woman has usually been seen as possessing experience but not knowledge. The notion that science, or Western medicine, is alien to the lives, experiences and practices of women in the third world operates in different ways in development practice as well as in development critiques.

Achuthan’s project addresses two related questions: one, whether the dai’s practices suggest a different model of knowledge, and two, how that knowledge is produced through the experiences and cultural contexts of these women. What I see in this project is not an effort to revive traditional knowledge or simply privilege women’s experience but an attempt to see what levels of translation are required to critique the discourse of mainstream science from a feminist standpoint.

The four inter-linked research projects detailed above recall and rearticulate the challenges posed by feminist scholarship to the social science and humanities disciplines. Drawing on this new research, we hope to create new forms of curricular intervention for the institutional and disciplinary locations where the culture question is now being addressed. The task before us is twofold: we aim to generate new frameworks of analysis through new research, which can account for the changing experiences of women and men, and to develop innovative new curricula based on this research.

Delinking the discussion about culture and gender from its established reference points (colonialism, difference, distinctiveness) as I would urge us to do need not mean a return to a prior history or pre-colonial cultural possibilities, but a focus on the translated and translating present.

A fascinating example of how social transformation occurs in a small town in coastal Karnataka in south-western India, and of how it implicates its women, is to be seen in ‘Gulabi Talkies’, a short story by Vaidehi originally written in Kannada. Singularly absent from the story is any sort of anxiety about colonialism or indeed about modernity. The focus here is on the translating present, on the negotiations of different kinds of women whose lives change (from daily routines to modes of conduct to social and personal relationships) with the appearance of the cinema. What is striking here is the absence of any attempt to mourn the past. At the end of the story, the alleged sex worker who had the talkies built is dead; the ownership of the talkies has changed, but an ‘invisible wave’ has arisen. ‘A wave once created only grows bigger and bigger; it can never recede’ (Vaidehi 2006).

Taking a cue from Vaidehi’s story, I suggest that what we need to do with the culture–gender conjuncture is to gain a critical grasp of how it works today. If we see this criticality as emerging from the space between languages, only then might we be able to come to terms with our translated/translating present. To acknowledge that questions of gender occupy an important place in thinking about culture not just because of the past intellectual history of certain spaces but because of how we understand both the present and the future ought to be a major issue for pedagogy in inter-Asia cultural studies.

References


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