Book Review

Seeing like a Feminist

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Introduction

This article is an attempt to understand the feminist discourse through the lens of Nivedita Menon (2012) through this review of her book titled “Seeing like a feminist”. Though drawing upon all of her arguments is beyond the scope of this article, it is an effort to critically approach some of her arguments. In doing so, this paper is more of an interaction between two subjectivities - firstly the author, and secondly the male subjectivity of this reviewer, with his consciously or subconsciously active cognitive filters.

For Menon (2012), seeing the world through the feminist lens is exposing below the surface of social order, which is appeared as natural, smooth and complete. Menon further suggests that her understanding of feminism primarily departs from the recognizing the operation of gendered modes of power, or more broadly, the hierarchical organizing of the world around gender as a key to maintain social order. The process of gendering, in which people are produced as men and women, is done through different forms of rules and regulations – some of which are internalized and some which have to be violently enforced.

She problematises the understanding of this social order as natural by drawing an analogy with the case of nude make up. She explains nude make up as “nude make-up looks are all about your skin looking fresh and dewy, without looking like you're even wearing any make-up. The whole point of nude make-up, clearly, is to spend hours painting your face in order to make it look like you had not touched it at all.” Similarly, she finds, the maintenance of the social order through the performance of prescribed rituals ultimately aims to produce the effect of untouched naturalness.

Menon (2012) maintains that amidst lot of disagreements among feminists, they all agree upon the common point of “gendered power relations oppress women and prevent them from attaining their full potential”. While discussing about conflicting positions among feminists, the author also shares her views across this book. For instance, for a long period, feminists criticized the commodification of female bodies in the sexualized form of advertisements, given the case of female bodies are subjected to male desire. Menon finds the genesis of this word – commodification – in Marx. He used it in the sense of how objects and relationships, that should be properly outside of commerce, is polluted by market values.

Contentions

Disagreeing with some feminists argument of commodification of female bodies in the sexualized form of advertisements by drawing upon the capitalistic logic, the author argues, in a world where everyone is selling their faculties like intellect or physical labour in order to make a living, this kind of critique has lost its edge. Expnding this argument further using the same logic, Menon argues, if the commodified mind of a professor when she accepts payment is acceptable to feminists, why it is not acceptable when a women commodify her body for advertisers. Developing this argument through shaking the foundations of normative values, she questions assigning “gender dignity” and “social respect” to some forms of work and not to others. She concludes that the feminist task is to upturn these values, to transform the ways in which we look at the world, and not to reaffirm the world as it is.

While discussing about women who prefers jobs like sex work and surrogacy, Menon frequently emphasizes on individual agency and choice instead of limiting the focus upon her version or understanding of the reality.
Paradigm shifts within feminist thinking

When discussing about pornography, Menon implies into the paradigm shift within feminist thinking from the Laura Mulvey’s conception of male gaze (1975) to feminists who consider the female viewer with an agency (a trend started in the 1980s and 90s). Mulvey primarily argues that in cinema, women are passive objects of male gaze, and camera gaze on women is necessarily male. Menon finds that, many feminists in India, who think in line with Mulvey, protested against the exploitative representation of the women’s bodies in films, posters and advertisements in 1970s and 1980s. These protests even resulted in the passing of indecent representation of women (prohibition) act, 1986. But, Menon fingers into the emergence of a generation anti censorship feminists who argue on the need to create and protect spaces of greater sexual expression for women.

Taking a position on this debate different from Mulvey, Menon argues “the gaze is not exclusively male, in other words -there are different kinds of gaze.” She furthers that “rather than assume that pornography only objectifies and commodifies women for the male gaze, what if we were to think of women too, as consumers of pornography; of pornography as arousing not only heterosexual desire but also homoerotic desire; and of pornography not as something fixed and easily recognizable but as diffuse and complex as the sensations it evokes? This way of thinking about pornography opens liberating ways of thinking about not only female sexuality, but about desire in general.”

Gender and sex

Drawing a distinction between gender and sex, Menon says the former as the biological difference between men and women, whereas the latter is the range of cultural meanings attached to that basic difference. She furthers that the human body is formed by culture, the physical environment, development in technology etc.

Feminism and subaltern discourse

Advancing the scope of feminist discourse by giving a marginal dimension, Menon argues legitimization of the superiority of one gender over another as biological determinism, an assumption which gives superiority to certain people by birth, like caste and race. The author in another context says “it is not only 'women' who can adopt feminism as a political stance and way oflife, but men who choose to do this have to take a stand against the privileges that they could otherwise take for granted.” She advances the scope of feminist discourse that

Diversity in the experience of femininity and how the author deals with it

Across this book, the author implicitly or explicitly acknowledges the diversity in the experience of femininity determined by factors like social and economic status, cultural background, race and caste. Menon acknowledges the fact of women is not a homogenous category. She says “feminism is not even about gender alone, but about understanding how gender is complicated by class, as in the case of domestic servants, by caste and by queer politics as in the case of gay men, hijras and intersex identities, In other words, feminism requires us to recognize that 'women' is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category.”

In one of the context the author answers to the question “is this book about India”. If she gives a “Yes” to this question, it might have used as a parameter to scrutinize this book and its author through serious questions of how it exclude or include diversity in the experience of femininity. But, Menon carefully prefers “no” to this question. Instead, she says “in this book, I draw on feminist scholarship and feminist politics in my part of the world to set up conversations with feminist debates and experiences globally. The key difference may be that, when we in the non-West theorize on the basis of our experiences, we rarely assume that these are generalizable everywhere. But we do believe that comparisons and engagements with other feminisms are not only possible, but unavoidable. Which is why, in this book, I often assume and address the lively global feminist voices that surround us. And when I say 'we', I generally mean feminists”.

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In short, through these lines she precisely suggests this book as her understanding of feminism informed by the locations where the author lives or lived, and her engagement with feminist literature and feminist politics from different parts of the world. In other words, these lines also implies that the subject of the author is not just inseparable from this book, but it is the central or what constitutes the heart of this book. It further points out the unavoidable or sometimes the central role of the subject of the author in feminist literature in general, much contrary to the functionalist understanding of reality as independent of the researcher.

**Dealing with “other” and feminist discourse**

Menon also suggests the limitation of feminists while dealing with “other feminine experience”. Here I have used the word other in the sense of those lived experiences of a woman, which are different from that of a feminist who attempts to study or engage with her, determined by factors like race, caste, class and other backgrounds. For instance, Menon gives the case of feminist considered prostitution as violence against women for a long time. But, drawing on a pan India survey among 3000 sex workers, she says 71% of them said they had entered the profession willingly.

Menon more clearly suggests into the flaws and limitations while a feminist dealing with other feminine experience while discussing about surrogate mothers. Dissenting to the feminist politics representational of the surrogate mothers, who prefers anonymity because of social prejudice, Menon finds “how many women are empowered enough to risk their identity being known, given the sexualized understanding of the work? Why should they not have the right to remain anonymous? An insistence on removing anonymity could reduce opportunities for women to take up such work.” She furthers that “unless some sort of community, of surrogate mothers themselves comes into being, evolving its own rules, even such a legislation may not protect their interests. A law devised by feminists representing the interests of women who become surrogates’, whose interests we presume to understand because ‘we are all women’, can at best be potentially useful but at worst, may make it difficult for women to make an income in this way.”

Menon’s contention to the latter feminist argument underscores, in many instances, the assumptions or the imagination of a feminist scholar about the other feminine experiences may not necessarily understand the reality, without having a conversation with the latter instead of imposing one way of looking at reality. Menon’s analysis of sex workers shows this conversation helps to advance the practice and theory of feminism into new levels. For example, as the author suggested, steps to protect sex workers from rape and physical abuse from their clients would be one such step that can enhance the scope of feminist theory and practice.

Menon also suggests that amidst lot of diversity in the experience of femininity, there are lot of similarities which brings women together. The author says any possible female reader of this book would be in a relatively powerful position about the working-class men she interacts with daily. At the same time, she would experience her relative powerlessness as a woman if faced by a man in a position to attack her sexually, regardless of his class or caste; or when she compares her life choices and autonomy with those of a man of her class.

**Family**

The author dissent with traditional understanding of family as an institution where only a specific set of people related in a specific way. She asks what is the wrong in understanding a homosexual couple or group of friends as family. She argues family as an institution based inequality with the hierarchies of gender and age to perpetuate patrilineal forms of property and descent. She finds that patriarchal family as the basis which lowers women to secondary status. This is why, their personal like bed room and the kitchen is also public and political.
Menon signs a challenge to patriliny in new reproductive technologies. A woman can become pregnant through donor sperm. Different women could perform the key functions of a mother like egg donor, surrogate mother and social mother.

Rape
Menon argues, though there is an apparent consensus between patriarch as well as an angriest feminist that rape is a terrible crime, the reasons behind reaching this consensus is diametrically opposite. Patriarchs views rape as a crime against the honour of the family and a fate worse than death. She adds that patriarchy finds women’s violation of lines in any form results in rape. In that sense, raped women is responsible for her fate. Whereas, feminists view rape as a crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman, and demands to stop blaming the victim. She finds the manifestation of patriarchal understanding of rape in the judicial system, by drawing on court verdicts like a rapist to marry the women he raped.

Modernism and gender dichotomy
Menon signs into the possibility of strict gender division as the construction of modernism. The author also points to a significant difference between western and non western cultures while understanding human body until European modernism universalized through colonialism. She argues that assumptions like hermaphroditism is a disease, natural flow of desire happens only between opposite sexes etc emerged in this period.

Menon draws on Oyewumi’s point of gender differences has not privileged in many pre colonial African cultures, as evident from cases like women traders. Oyewumi adds that, in Yoruba community, seniority is the defining axis of hierarchy instead of third and fourth gender. Yoruba language itself is also gender free.

The author also makes the point that in many cultures, like native American culture, honoured and respected third and fourth gender. Often they called such people as two spirit people, and they were visionaries, healers, medicine people in these societies.

Menon mentions AK Ramanujan’s observation of Bhakti saints in India crossed and recrossed the lines between male and female in their lives. She also cites Ashis Nandy’s observation of premodern Indian society was marked by fluid gender identities, which are erased by British imperialism.

Relevance of the author
Beyond contributing to understanding of feminism, Menon’s book provides an entry point to approach discussions around gender, which is very relevant in India given the prevailing ambiguity around the discourse of gender. This confusion is clearly evident from the recent clarification sought by ministry of social justice from the supreme court on a verdict, which, given transgenders the right to decide their own gender, which is made on April 15, 2014. It also says “transgender” is used in a wider sense in the present age. “Even gays, lesbians and bisexuals are included by the descriptor ‘transgender.’ This has come to be known as an umbrella term”. Contradicting to it, the ministry of social justice argues lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGBT) could not “obviously” be included in the transgender category. The concept of LGB was based on the “sexual orientation” of a person, while the term “transgender” had to do with “a person’s own deep sense of gender identity.”

This debate equally fingers into the confusion of apex bodies when it comes to seminal questions on gender, and the need to develop a broader frame work to address such questions. This book holds a promise in this regard.

Conclusion
Nivedita Menon’s “Seeing like a feminist” marks the shifts and new trends in the feminist way of looking. The criticism of this book is not just limited to the patriarchal social order or various institutions help to maintain its interests
and values, but also it goes against some of the early ways of feminist looking. Menon’s contention to Mulvey’s arguments on male gaze is one such example that can be traced from this book.

I think, one vantage point to analyse this case would be internal diversity within the feminist experience, informed by diverse time, space and socio-cultural backgrounds. In that sense it would be more judicial to consider the different opinions under the umbrella term of feminism as diversity of opinion instead of conflicting opinion.

In my view, another position to appraise this diversity of opinion is to recognize a feature inherent in feminist discourse – its ability to constantly engage with the changing patterns in all aspects of life, including the values and thought process. Menon’s contention to some feminists argument of sex work as commodification is a proof of it. In short, it seems, the house of feminist discourse is inherently willing to constantly being subjected to repair and rewire.

References