Chapter - I

The Relevance Of A Feminist Epistemology

THE EXCLUSION OF WOMEN’S WAYS OF KNOWING BY MAINSTREAM EPISTEMOLOGY

The definition of knowledge as justified, true belief is exclusionary. Justification includes reason and objectivity. The norms of reason and objectivity are patriarchal, phallocentric and sexist. Advocates of the definition in question like Plato and Aristotle degrade women as devoid of rational capacity, understood in the classical masculinist sense. Suppression of their voices is subsequently justified.

Philosophy, since its inception, is found to construe women as the non-subject. The woman is denied agency to participate creatively in philosophical discourses. Her voice is silenced. By the third century B.C., sexism, patriarchy and phallocentrism are seen to have organized themselves efficiently enough to banish women from enterprises characterized as rational, true, valid, and rigorous. The Ionians in the sixth century BC and the Pythagoreans expressly denigrate women, as far as their knowledge is concerned.

Plato’s misogyny is of a comparatively subtler shade. His ingenuity consists in the ability to choose the aptest of metaphors in conveying that women have nothing to contribute to knowledge. In Plato’s system, the woman is treated as the space, the corporeality that
gives birth to the philosopher. Materiality is not the essence, nor the good, nor the Idea, nor reason. It is outside logic. The woman is indirectly related to the philosopher, the practitioner of reason and logic. Her relation to knowledge and philosophy is so far-fetched, that it is almost unintelligible. Though not overtly sexist, the system of Plato is distinctly patriarchal. It is so in the sense that it makes a sharp distinction between qualities that promote values peculiar to masculinity, like truth, rigour, virtue et al, downgrading qualities – like body, action, emotion and the like associated with femininity. The system in question is phallocentric too. Plato treats the category “human” as theoretically gender-neutral. In practice, he openly glorifies masculine qualities. The feminine, in effect, fails to find its place in the domain of the masculinized “human”. In The Republic and The Laws, Plato recommends social equality between men and women. Equality, however, is stipulated as achievable specifically on condition that women abandon typically feminine qualities and embrace masculine norms.

Aristotle excludes women from science, philosophy and epistemology much more forthrightly and unequivocally than Plato. He assimilates women’s functions to the realm of nature. These functions are graded with reference to their utility in securing men’s ends. This facilitates the naturalization of women’s subordination. Supremacy is accorded to men in his biologicist accounts too - as for example, in the case of reproduction. Aristotle advocates a theory of the unity of human beings. This unity is a product of body and soul.
Women contribute body or shapeless, passive matter to this unity. Man contributes the active soul or form. Aristotle’s logic is one of total abstraction from the particular, the contingent, the factual and the non-propositional; qualities that represent women. Women, therefore, can justifiably be silenced.

Michelle Walker\(^1\) draws upon Le Deouffe’s *The Philosophical Imaginary* where Le Deouff defines the techniques resorted to by mainstream philosophy to silence women and to reduce them to non-subjects. “Permissiveness” is taken to be a quality of a philosopher, who allows women at least to receive private tuition. Women before the eighteenth century are seen to be deprived of direct access to educational institutions. Their access to philosophy is necessarily through a mediator, as exemplified by the cases of Heloise and Abelard, Hipparchia and Crater, Elizabeth and Descartes and many others. In most of such cases, the woman’s love of philosophy may be parasitic upon her feeling for the philosopher concerned. The sublimation of the male students’ love of the male philosopher to the discipline of philosophy itself is desirable. Such transference of feeling in the case of women, enabling them to practise philosophy professionally, is, however, discouraged. This explains the amateurism sensed by Le Deouff in the relation of women to philosophy. She again considers fidelity to be a quality of women intending to engage in philosophy. Fidelity is the ability to repeat or reproduce the master’s text with photographic accuracy, whereas in the case of the male student the greater the philosopher, the more distorted is his
reading of the text. Le Deouff cites the cases of Leibniz’s reading of Malebranche and Hegel’s reading of Kant. If fidelity is taken to be a positively valued feminine quality, women can never assume the role of the subject, the master or the creator of classic texts.

Philosophy, in this context and capacity, is representative of knowledge at large, particularly, of science. In the instance of philosophy, patriarchy, phallocentrism and sexism, during the nineteenth century, are seen to have manifested themselves much more overtly and coarsely than before. In the case of science, even though formal barriers have been lifted, enabling many women to pursue science academically, a glass ceiling persists. It precludes women from joining higher posts. The social and political clout within the scientific and technological communities brings this about.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR SANCTIONING EXCLUSION

The exclusion of women from the domain of epistemology proper is not secured arbitrarily. The formal discipline of logic, traditionally esteemed as embodying the purest form of reason, has been exposed by feminist epistemologists to be the most effective in marginalizing and excluding women. Many feminists feel classical logic to be chiefly responsible for the historical construction of reason as masculine. If reason is definable in masculine terms, as incorporating mathematical precision, necessity, universality and the like, then characteristics associated with femininity, like emotionality,
embodiedness, particularity are liable to be denigrated. Logic, in fact, possesses the potentiality, not only of subordinating women, but that of lending the subordinated category of individuals an aura of natural subordination.

Logic brings about the naturalization of domination by creating a hierarchical dualism. Val Plumwood defines a dualism succinctly in the following way: “Dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalized in culture and characterized by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders construed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, ruler and ruled, centre and periphery.” Dualism, so understood, is much stronger in expressing opposition than mere difference. It differentiates in terms of categories superior/inferior. The dualisms normally associated with gender, like male/female, mind/body, civilized/primitive, human/nature are evidences that women are not merely different from men, but inferior to them. While the former components of the instances of binary opposition cited above represent ideals of reason, peculiar to masculinity, the subsequent ones express aberrations or lack of reason, associated historically and contemporarily in western culture with femininity. It is power, which so construes the difference between men and women. The dominant, male, Euro-centric, powerful class divides the world into the centre and the margin. ‘Reason’ and ‘human virtues’ are designed to represent the powerful class who also occupy the center. The margin
or periphery is constituted by women and other kinds of exclusions representing unreason or illogic.

Different entities may be coordinate, but dualized others are essentially subordinate, being inferior. Had women been merely different from men in their cognitive propensities, they might have been construed as capable of alternative ways of knowing. But, being inferior, i.e., being bodily and animal-like, they are justifiably completely excluded from cognitive enterprises.

Dualism, which is a specialized kind of dichotomy, thriving on domination and hierarchy, is endorsed by classical logic. The stringent kind of distinctness that it presupposes is achievable by the application of the concept of negation recognized by classical logic. The concept of negation in question rules out the possibility of mutuality or interaction altogether. Dualism, also, is interested in radical exclusion of the inferiorized other for effective subjugation.

Radical exclusion is a kind of separation that is more exclusive than simple distinction. It is hyperseparation, in which any kind of overlap or continuity between the two sides of the binary, e.g. ‘P’ and ‘~P’, is erased. Complete polarization is the specialty of the classical notion of negation. This concept of negation justifies hyperseparation, in which the number and significance of differences between the gender categories is magnified. Differences are construed not as merely those of degree or quantity, but as of quality. As for example, in patriarchy, while men are socially and conceptually constructed as
intellectual, aggressive, egoistic, women are constructed as intuitive or emotional, submissive, altruistic and so on. These complementary sets of qualities are attributed to the natures of men and women. The properties characterizing men qualify them as proper agents of knowledge. Qualities attributed to women, on the contrary, like lack of intellect, presence of intuitiveness and the kind are suitable to justify the exclusion of women from the field of epistemology. It is to be noted that though these complementary sets of qualities exclude each other, they each in turn presuppose a corresponding complementary quality. The ingenuity of radical exclusion consists in concealing the fact that thought involves forms, qualities or concepts that overlap with their opposites. Persons uncritical of the phenomenon of radical exclusion are habituated to consider “sloppiness” to be the opposite of “rigour”, “empty rhetoric” to be the opposite of “precise mathematics”, “mushy sentimentality” to be the opposite of “heartless competition”.3 But Julie A Nelson quotes scholars like Howard Margolis4, Georgescu Roegen5, who are of the opinion that a more sophisticated version of reason would allow the fusion of logical reasoning and intuition. Intuition involves analogy, pattern recognition etc. It would also permit a fusion of logical and dialectical reasonings. While logical reasoning is fit to deal with the abstract aspect of thought only, dialectical reasoning is friendly to contact and takes concepts like good, justice, and probability seriously. Most of the cleavages engineered by hyperseparation as a matter of fact allow overlaps or bridging qualities. But the interest of radical exclusion,
justified by the classical notion of negation, lies in concealing bridging qualities and in over-emphasizing distinctions. Such rational practices have far-reaching consequences when applied to gender differences. The bridging qualities shared by the masculine and feminine categories are ignored and the differences are highlighted. Radical exclusion thus renders gender equality to be impossible.

Naturalization of domination gets further entrenched when homogenization combines with radical exclusion. Homogenization is to be understood as the venture of denying or hiding differences among constituents of both the valorized and the inferiorized groups. Homogenization subsumes individuals of the group under the fold of a differenceless universal. In the context of gender, hyperseparation is justified by an appeal to male and female natures. Though a strict demarcation between male and female characteristics is a social creation, it is presented as natural. Val Plumwood quotes Marilyn Frye,\(^6\) who opines that in order to present domination as natural, it is helpful to uphold that the gender categories are completely dichotomous, and that each category manifests complete coherence internally. Since such a well-defined dichotomy is unrealistic and absent in nature, utmost alertness is required in incorporating all individuals artificially into either of the two homogeneous categories. Feminists need to be constantly vigilant about safeguarding multiplicity and variety within the category ‘women’ to resist mechanical homogenization.
Homogenization also reinforces backgrounding or denied dependency according to Plumwood. This is a scheme of rendering the ‘other’ inessential by denying the benefits derived from the ‘other’. Woman is thereby reduced to a uniform universal, forming the background against which men’s activities and feats of excellence are performed. Since all women are treated as being identical each woman is easily interchangeable with the other. Every woman is a potential care-giver. It is the prerogative of a woman to serve to nurture. These are activities that have no exchange value in the market, therefore they are perceived as non-productive labour. By contrast man’s labour is productive and important; woman’s labour is non-productive and insignificant. Non-recognition of an entity as a unique, distinct, exclusive, unrepeatable, uninterchangeable self ensures easy and uneventful backgrounding.

Another mechanism of constituting the identity of a woman as exactly the same as all other women is focus and attention. Attention is paid to the domain of male members that becomes the focus. As a result, women are pushed out of the focus to the background. Subsequently, women are made invisible, they are silenced. Men create an artificial hierarchy of activities. In this hierarchy, those activities, which nourish the male order materially and physically, are downgraded, and stipulated as not worth noticing. Women, in this way, are reduced to the background, comprising the “constant repetitive uneventful activities” against which the foreground, namely, the autonomous, rational, rigorous, mathematical activities of
men thrive. The masculine identity is susceptible to disintegration if its dependency on the feminine is acknowledged.

The phallocratic perspective seems to be blissfully unaware of the fact that there are alternative perspectives, like the perspective of women, of slaves, of the colonized etc., from which the male identity could in turn be judged to be inconsequential and the background. The inessentiality of the feminine order is a myth. The centre requires the ‘other’ to define its own importance, its identity and boundaries, in addition to requiring it for his material needs. It is the periphery which confers centrality to the so-called centre. Ironically, “relational definition” forms a feature of the hierarchical dualism in question, which determines the identity both of the centre and of the periphery, in terms of the centre’s prerogatives. The master-identity exercises its power in defining his characteristics as socially valuable and those of the other as lacks, negations or perversions of the supposedly valuable qualities of the centre. In this framework, women are homogenized as qualified by those attributes only, which serve the interests of men. Men are defined in terms of exclusion of these qualities. Women, as such, have not been construed at par with men or as independent centers of need. As far as the rhetoric of hierarchical dualism goes, men are naturally equipped with those sets of qualities, which make knowledge possible. Women are defined relationally as lacks or negations of these ideals of reason. If ‘P’ stands for rational beings then ‘¬P’ stands for the lack of rationality. If men are rational and women are emotional (not rational), then women’s epistemic agency is
denied. They are treated as passive receivers of information. Silencing them is natural, therefore justified.

Being radically excluded from the central sphere and being homogenized to be suitable to conform to the needs of men, women are instrumentalized or objectified. They are conceived not as having ends of their own, but as means or instruments of realizing the ends of the theoretically superior upper side, i.e. men. Western culture shows meagre consideration for the Kantian dictum of treating human-kind as intrinsically worthwhile or valuable. It is possible also that they consider women to be too beastly to be a part of the masculine moral order.

Hierarchical dualism, justified by the definition of negation, corroborated by classical logic, is characterized by the oppressive features of radical exclusion, homogenization, denied dependency and the like, which naturalize the subordination of women and legitimize the epistemological ostracization of women. The basic presuppositions of classical logic, as such, are in pressing need of a close scrutiny. The second chapter preoccupies itself with an examination of the cogency of classical logic.

THE AIM OF FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Feminists react in diverse ways to the deauthorization of the feminine voice and to the scheme of logic or reason that legitimizes this deauthorization. Continental feminists concentrate on the categorization of women as embodied. They theorize profusely and
interestingly on feminism and body. Radical feminists recommend severance of all connections with the tools and methods of mainstream epistemology. A strategically better position would be to conform to the mainstream argumentative and analytic tradition. Analysis and argumentation happen to be the key tools of philosophy. Containing itself within the philosophical fold would afford the feminist claims to win legitimization. Moreover, conformity to the analytic tradition is effective in countering sexism, androcentrism, patriarchy etc. through stringent argumentation, sharpened by logic and epistemology, through choice of clear, precise words rather than through typically post-modern indefinite resignifications and a total derision of foundations. The tradition of Frege, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, are saturated with male biases. In spite of this many feminists find some positive insights in these theories. They argue that with suitable ramifications the sexist bias of these theories can be rectified. Subsequently the theories can be used to address the gender oppression identified by feminists. I pursue the methodology of academic feminism, comprising abstract theorization mainly. Sound theorization is indispensable to grass-root feminist activism.

The preceding paragraph ought not to suggest that I pay full allegiance to the basic tenets of mainstream analytic philosophy. That would render feminist epistemology redundant. I only profess my preference of the analytic method of argumentation adopted by mainstream logic and epistemology. So far as the nature of epistemic norms and content is concerned, feminist epistemology is obliged to
deviate from mainstream epistemology. Feminist epistemology requires major revisions of the norms of rationality and objectivity, glorified by mainstream epistemology. I express the urgency of a radical transformation of the norm of reason in chapter two. Problems related to the mainstream concept of objectivity are addressed in chapters four and five. I attempt to offer a revised interpretation of objectivity in chapter six.

The aim of feminist epistemology in general consists in re-politicizing an already politicized venture – which conceals its political affiliations with utmost finesse. Epistemology proper is emphatic about its apolitical, context-transcendent, value and gender-neutral stance. The cognitive style endorsed and pursued by mainstream epistemology is predominantly discursive - emphasizing on reason, objectivity, rigorous argumentation, public authorization of knowledge claims, demand for normative justificatory standards of knowledge and so on. It rules out personal, lived experiences of women as a source of knowledge, as personal, lived experiences lack universalizability. When lived-experiences are disqualified and only objective reports are entertained, woman’s world is automatically kept outside the domain of epistemic relevance. The choice of a logic based on radical exclusion appears to have a political motive. Such a motive is rooted in gender-politics. First woman’s lived –experiences fail to gain credibility and then they are silenced. The end result of silencing is the culmination of a series of steps. First a hyperseparation between the masculine and feminine ways of relating to the world is
established; they are namely the rational and the non-rational. Secondly the rational engagement with the world is thought to be more dependable. Thirdly the non-rational engagement is thought to be meaningless and therefore silenced.

Reference has also been made in the present thesis to the epistemological consequence of the social and political arrangements in science-communities. Knowledge-production and politics are inseparably intertwined. One of the aims of feminist epistemology is to problematize the objectivity proclaimed by scientific and philosophical knowledge. It also aims at laying bare how the sociology of knowledge influences the content of theory. The historical, geographical, political contexts and values of the knower are as important as the context of justification. Analytical feminism, however, does not denounce epistemic norms or foundations at their face value. It subjects the norms of reason, objectivity to critical scrutiny. Scrutiny reveals that these norms, far from being apolitical, reverberate with the political interests of male knowers. Theories regulated by these norms have been oppressive to women. Feminists of the analytic tradition believe that a restructuring by replacing these epistemic norms is necessary. The restructuring of norms needs to be guided by an emancipatory vision. This could lead both to the identification of gender oppression in epistemology and to a corrective measure. The political acumen of feminist epistemologists consists in revealing the patriarchal, phallocentric nature of reason, objectivity.
Preoccupation with the norms of reason, objectivity and the like forms the basic focus of analytic and academic feminism.

The points discussed so far give rise to the conviction that mainstream/malestream epistemology cannot be expected to reflect the knowledge claims of women and other peripheral people without mutating their experiences. Its norms preclude the transparent expression of the points of view of women. The logic or reason grounding classical epistemology corroborates an interpretation of negation that helps to hyperseparate, and consequently, to homogenize, background and objectify women. In Aristotelean logic, negation signifies radical exclusion. A proposition and its negation, \( p \) and \( \sim p \), are distinct, both in terms of quality and quantity. They cannot be true together or false together. Such radical difference in quality rules out the possibility of overlapping qualities or of mutuality. If negation is taken in this strict sense, and women are taken as qualitative negations of masculinity, malestream reason cannot be expected to represent women’s contentions. Negation, however, forms an integral, irreplaceable component of Aristotelean logic. No change in the concept of negation will be entertained by the premises of classical logic or epistemology. This makes the need for a feminist epistemology acutely felt. It can replace the concept of negation traced above with a less oppositional one, and thereby, challenge radical exclusion of women from science and philosophy.
The norm of objectivity, again, signifies complete neutrality or aperspectivity in traditional epistemology. As mentioned in the previous chapter, and demonstrated in the following chapters, knowledge is inseparable from politics and contextual factors. Malestream epistemology embodies masculine politics. It resists the infiltration of feminine values and interests. The feminine is condemned by hierarchical dualism as inferior. Values and interests, peculiar to femininity cannot be given entry to the malestream, sanitized epistemology. A feminist epistemology is necessitated by the requirements of bringing the power play latent in mainstream epistemology to surface; to demonstrate the undesirability of such games, if any, by critical scrutiny; and to champion the inclusion of values and interests, peculiar to women into the content of scientific theories. In brief, a feminist epistemology is needed to dismantle the malestream concept of objectivity as value neutrality and offer alternative models of objectivity, friendly to women’s needs and interests. Malestream epistemology with norms peculiar to itself cannot be expected to bring these changes about.

In the subsequent chapters, I attempt to work out how the norms of reason, objectivity can be mediated by feminist epistemic norms for the best expression of women’s political concerns which are also human concerns. I intend to examine different schools of feminist epistemology, e.g. standpoint theory, postmodern feminism and feminist empiricism. My aim is to see which of these approaches best serves the feminist cause.
Notes and References


