Chapter – IV

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

In trying to understand Rae Langton’s stand on objectivity\(^1\) in the second chapter, it became clear that she believes considerations pertaining to gender are transient. Theories can be cleansed of gender saturatedness by empirical rigour. Such purified theories are good scientific theories. Feminist empiricists continue to conform to the empiricistic tradition, display a loyalty to the methods and norms of empiricism. As already mentioned, Harding finds the norm of objectivity, as displayed by mainstream epistemology, to be questionable. Shefali Moitra points out that other feminists, particularly Elizabeth Lloyd and Sandra Harding reject the context-transcendence of objectivity completely.\(^2\) In this chapter my aim is to consider feminist standpoint epistemology at length, with occasional references to Sandra Harding’s position.

The aim of feminist standpoint theory consists in generating emancipatory theories for women, workers and other subaltern classes. Feminist standpoint theory is a variety of critical theory, advocated by the Frankfurt school of critical social theory, represented by philosophers like Adorno and Habermas. Feminist standpoint theories could be useful in uprooting oppression, only if their project of taking the context and subjectivity of women and other oppressed groups were seriously considered.
Sandra Harding claims that the idea of neutrality or aperspectivity enhances knowledge-distorting forces. Undistorted theories can be achieved only by context sensitivity. While Langton considers scientific/epistemic rigour to be both necessary and sufficient in resisting bad theories, Harding construes rigour only to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of ensuring objective theories. Epistemic rigour is insufficient because politics is an inescapable and universal phenomenon. There is no context, untouched by power and politics. Therefore, neutrality or complete aperspectivity is an illusion. Neutrality functions like a veil, concealing the subtle, ingenious, unfair games played by power and politics. By concealing these strategies, the classical norm of aperspectivity makes the scrutiny of political manipulations inherent in science communities impossible. It can be useful only in protecting the autonomy of science from external pressure, as for example, the Nazi involvement with science – as pointed out by Moitra. But the influence of internal politics is much more pervasive and substantial. Power is exerted by dominant science institutions through the choice of the questions to be pursued, research strategies to be adopted, theories to be sanctioned and the like. The funding agencies, too, prioritize the interests of the dominant groups. Neutrality also helps to suppress the feminine questions by attributing a simulated gender-neutrality to the category “human”. As previously mentioned, though officially representing all gender categories, the expression “human” in actual practice represents only
the male, privileged cluster, so that human questions and problems raised in science are highly gender-specific, male questions. Internal politics is not detectable within the framework of the scientific community. Aperspectivity cannot defend science against this kind of covert politics. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, it reinforces the power play in question by hiding it. In this way, it weakens the objectivity of the scientific project. Sandra Harding proposes to strengthen objectivity by being sensitive to the ways power influences theories. By attending to these techniques, the scientist and epistemologist can retard the distorting presence of might and politics in the contents of a scientific theory.

Along with context sensitivity, the subjectivity of the researcher, too, needs to be considered seriously. The cleavage between the subject and object is unnatural, forcefully imposed by pre-feminist theories and logical empiricism. The subjective inputs, the social identity, the sex/gender factor condition theories profusely. The footprints of the subject are not indications of bad science. The subject is as integral a constituent of knowledge as the object. Any subject is characterized by a location or a situation. Sandra Harding classifies certain situations or locations as more appropriate for blocking the influence of power and politics on theories than others. She refers to the locations of the knower as standpoints. The standpoints of the peripheralized, the oppressed are more reliable in generating undistorted theories than those at the core. The intense interest of those inhabiting the centre or core of a society, asundered
into conflict groups and sub-groups by hierarchical dualism and other
decision and other kinds of status quo
damages these inhabitants’ self-criticality. It has previously been
mentioned in Chapter two how hierarchical dualism posits a
privileged centre and a marginalized periphery. The centre
comprises men and the periphery comprises women, slaves, the
colonized, the racially underprivileged and so on. The constituents of
the core, namely the economically and epistemologically privileged
men enjoy cognitive and other kinds of authority without any credit
on their part. It is in their interest to perpetuate the existing sexual
and other kinds of social status quo. They hardly question whether
such a division of society into superior and inferior is justified. The
inhabitants of the centre also become accustomed to the benefits they
enjoy. They fail to detect any abnormality or injustice in the existing
social system. The sensitivity to critically question their eligibility to
enjoy the privileges they do, without sharing it with fellow human
beings, is damaged by the habit of having enjoyed these privileges
through long years. They are used to consider it their prerogative.
Their pronouncement on the definition, scope of knowledge weakens
objectivity. Strong objectivity, the theory forwarded by Sandra
Harding, is an intermediate position between total aperspectivity and
relativism. It demands that scientific and philosophical theories be
determined by the standpoint of the less privileged stratum of
knowers. The hierarchically underprivileged is epistemically
advantaged or empowered, because the political situation of the latter
is less likely to damage their natural critical abilities by power or
success of science and knowledge. Their inhabitance of situations of
powerlessness protects their self-reflexivity from corruption. As
such, they are likely to pronounce their epistemological judgements
more responsibly and in an undistorted way.

Recognition of multiple epistemic subjects necessitates
heterogenization of subjectivity. Standpoint epistemologists face no
difficulty in heterogenizing subjects, because, as Moitra points out,
“what differentiates a standpoint from the mainstream is not sex
identity but power identity. Standpoint theorists believe that women
and other marginalized groups have been least corrupted by power,
therefore, their understanding of marginal lives as well as of the
macro-social order is likely to be more objective.” Standpoint
epistemologists maintain that the standpoint of the powerless
involves women of innumerable shades and also marginalized men
and alternative sexual categories, like lesbians and homosexuals.

A standpoint may be privileged for various reasons. It may be
privileged on account of enjoying a unique access to a particular
aspect of reality, about which it can offer superior, specialized
knowledge. An auto mechanic, for example, occupies a better
epistemic position than car owners as far as knowledge of auto
mechanism is concerned. Marxism, a theory very close to standpoint
theory, construes the standpoint of the proletariat to be epistemically
more advantaged than that of the capitalists. It affords a less
alienated insight concerning economical, historical, sociological issues. Feminist standpoint theories attach importance to feminine and marginalized standpoints, as these are characterized by deep, as opposed to superficial knowledge of the operations of the society. While the standpoint of the privileged illuminates surface regularities only, that of the deprived exposes basic, elementary regularities. Moreover, the dominant class often errs in representing the modality of social inequality. The standpoint of the privileged credits social inequality with a natural and necessary appearance, whereas that of the socially oppressed reveals it to be contingent upon social factors.

Women’s standpoints are richer in comparison to those of the privileged male intellectuals, managers and administrators in the sense that reflection on women’s lives problematizes the distorted versions of men’s and women’s lives and their causal connection that originate in the male standpoint. The privileged standpoint is conditioned by hierarchical dualism, androcentrism, phallocentrism and the like. The essential feature of thought arising at privileged locations is conviction in the natural inferiority of women. Women’s standpoints are informative about how degradation of women leads to inaccurate, illusory representations concerning the gender categories in various scientific and social theories. Pre-feminist Marxism, for example, is known for its degradation of emotional, sexual, domestic work and its explanation of life as a whole in terms of the activities of the proletariat. Marxist feminists emphasize the centrality of women in the reproduction and care-giving systems.
Women’s centrality in these systems is comparable to the workers’ centrality in the productive system. Women’s standpoint rewards these women with a much clearer vision of how patriarchy and hierarchical dualism background and ensure denial of dependency on women’s contribution in the fulfillment of basic human needs.

Oppression constitutes a strong standpoint that women can claim for themselves. Women and other direct sufferers of oppression are privileged by an immediate vision of the social dimension of truth. The privilege may be expressed as the ability to see reality simultaneously from the perspectives of the dominant and of the oppressed. This presents women with a grasp on the comparative worth of both the perspectives – which enables a powerful critique of the social order. This self-evaluative capacity helps in raising new and critical questions concerning the operations of the society and of nature. Marginalized lives constitute rich resources for scientific problem selection and research programmes. Harding⁹ argues that not only women, but all marginalized groups benefit by initiating thought from women’s lives, because gender does not function in isolation. Gender-constructs are linked with race, class, sexuality – and are constructed by such categories in their own turn. Women, for example, are characterized by class and race. Analysis of class relations, antiracist movements cannot afford to under-rate knowledge generated by women’s situations. Again, research beginning from oppressive practices, like imperialism, capitalism, compulsory heterosexuality and the like produces
voluminous feminist accounts, representing the natural and social orders undistortedly and enriching diverse kinds of liberatory projects. Sandra Harding\textsuperscript{10} recommends beginning men’s thought also from the standpoint of women’s lives. Male feminists like John Stuart Mill, Marx and Engels, Frederick Douglas are interpreted by Harding as having situated themselves into women’s situations. This helped them to acquire insight into the deep polarization that impregnates the patriarchal social situation.

It may be relevant to point out here that recognition of multiple subjects is made possible by the more liberal kind of logic discussed in Chapter two. Classical logic is averse to conflict, contradiction. Systems subscribing to classical logic hesitate to defy the concept of a unitary subject. It may be due to this reason that although social constructionism has contributed largely in dismantling the disembodied, isolated and autonomous subject, the notion of the unitary subject continues to dominate Marxism and empiricism. Such systems are probably apprehensive that if the subjects are multiple and heterogeneous, knowledge claims generated by them would be inconsistent and contradictory – characteristics that classical logic is decidedly against. Moreover, multiple views may stand in the way of constructing a systematic epistemology. Marx, therefore, considers the industrial proletariats to be the only ideal subjects of knowledge. Empiricists consider the possession of scientific rationality and objectivity to be the pre-conditions of ideal subjectivity. Women, working class people, the Irish, Jews, people of Mediterranean
culture are some of the classes cited by Harding\textsuperscript{11} which are construed by empiricists as less than rational. They are not eligible to function as subjects. But as previously discussed, feminist standpoint epistemology believes that de-essentializing subjectivity is characterized by significant emancipatory potential. But de-essentialization in the spirit of feminist standpoint epistemology is conceivable only against the background of a logic of difference traced in Chapter two.

The Question of Objectivity: Standpoint epistemology denounces relativism. Harding is a proponent of what she herself describes as strong objectivity.\textsuperscript{12} Yet feminist standpoint theory has been criticized for being relativistic by many, as it does not proclaim any transcendental, unitary subject of knowledge. It invites as many participants, representing as many qualitatively different perspectives as possible, to engage in dialogue, initiating from the site of women’s and other marginalized people’s lives. This recognition does not amount to relativism. Mainstream philosophers, like Goldman\textsuperscript{13} also argue that the incorporation of the social dimension into reason does not compromise objectivity. Like Harding and other standpoint epistemologists, he denies that beliefs arise from nowhere. True beliefs issue out of social discourse, interaction with each other, reading others’ texts and sharing skills with others. His arguments to establish the point that recognition of the social factor does not precipitate relativism may be utilized in defending Harding’s position that along with the social factor, the sex/gender factor
should also be highlighted in understanding epistemology. Goldman argues that the relativism anticipated in this context cannot be truth-relativism, viz., the belief that the truth of a theory is something over and above the world or reality, like a specific culture or paradigm. This kind of relativism cannot vitiate feminist standpoint theory, because it makes no pronouncements on what constitutes truth, whether truth is established through correspondence or coherence. It merely seeks to account for the origin of beliefs.

Again, feminist standpoint theory cannot be reduced to epistemological relativism either. This is the theory that the justification of a belief is relative to any factor, besides the world or reality, like culture. Goldman refuses to believe that there is any tension between the social and the rational in the context of justification. Beliefs can be justified, even though socially caused. Socially caused unjustified beliefs are exceptions. Some social factors in the causation of beliefs accord the belief concerned a better direction of fit with reality than other social factors. This is the view of both Goldman and Harding. The traditional marginalization of women, for example, exhausts their interest in propagating theories that would perpetuate the dominant sexual status quo. The admission that some social factors are more revealing and reliable than others is a strong indication of the non-relativistic character of feminist standpoint epistemology. It cannot be deduced from the premises of feminist standpoint theory that all feminine perspectives are equally potent to give rise to justified beliefs. Goldman adduces plenty of
examples of socially caused certified beliefs in science. The social causation of beliefs does not render science, even physics, relativistic. One need not be apprehensive that admission of social causation of beliefs reduces standpoint theory to epistemological relativism.

Reflections on and critical scrutiny of social influences does not lead to relativism. This is an alternative to the detachment-based ideal of objectivity. Detachment-based objectivity is degraded as weak objectivity by Harding. The alternative to weak objectivity, contrary to relativism, is “strong objectivity”.

Caution must be exercised, however, to prevent overlap of Harding’s view with mainstream and alternative theories of knowledge that endorse social construction of knowledge. As mentioned already, Harding’s epistemology, involving variegated, multiple, heterogeneous subjectivity can possibly be entertained only on the strength of a logic of difference, suggested by Plumwood. No mainstream philosopher has recorded his certification of non-classical logic. In the second place, Harding does not commit herself to any theory of truth. Her interest consists in generating fair and emancipatory theories. She is guided by the pragmatic and political, feminist need of liberating women and other peripheral groups. Again, while other social constructionists consider all the social factors giving rise to belief seriously, Harding advocates privileging the marginalized standpoint specifically, exclusively. The
marginalized standpoint is not merely more dependable in exposing androcentric, sexist assumptions. It is intellectually more illuminating too.

The acceptability of Harding’s tenets, however, are not beyond question. Feminist standpoint theorists, like Harding, reject empiricism on the ground that it does not consider social identity, politics, membership in communities and sex/gender as integral constituents of experience. Harding’s stand against neutrality, glorified by traditional empiricism, has been discussed in the previous section.

Lynn Hankinson Nelson holds that the foreclosures, qualifying classical, even Quinean empiricism, are not intrinsic to empiricism. There is no premise in the empiricists’ theory of evidence that entails the inherence of these exclusions in the fabric of the empiricist theory of evidence. Experience can be broadened to take these factors into account. If experience is allowed to be understood in this enlarged sense, feminist standpoint theorists should give up their anti-empiricist position.

Abandonment of empiricism by feminist standpoint theories is absurd, because its basic postulate that the political experience of division of power, experienced by the politically disadvantaged, accords them the epistemic privilege peculiar to the marginalized standpoint – is established empirically. Nelson clarifies, that the cogency of the claims of feminist standpoint epistemology will be
confirmed through “studying how scientific revolutions and revolutions in political thinking come about and how they are related – including, eventually, the study of the revolution in which feminists are currently engaged.”17

The tenability of standpoint theory, if any, is sustainable on empiricistic grounds only. The theory concentrates on the rectification of the context of discovery by recommending incorporation of subjective factors like sex/gender, community membership, values and the like. Standpoint theory, however, makes no explicit comments on the logic of justification. In the first place, the possibility persists that the justification of the claims established by the marginalized population is left to the dominant, masculinized standards, like classical empiricism, rationalism – characterized by their narrow versions of logic and objectivity. These norms are plainly unkind and detrimental to marginalized knowledge-claims. Unless standpoint theorists suggest constructive measures with the help of a robust empiricism to protect these claims from mainstream hegemonic interference there appears no sense in letting these claims arise in the first instance.

The second adverse reaction stated against standpoint epistemologists arising from the neglect of empiricism is that such theories are liable to be reduced to mere political power-hunting. Sara B. Mc-Peak,18 for example, revolts against the idea that marginality can ground knowledge. It does not constitute an
epistemic advantage, because epistemic advantage has to do with knowledge, and marginality deprives the oppressed of the opportunity to exercise the intellect and acquire knowledge. Knowledge can be acquired through experience and education. Suffering experienced by the marginalized has nothing to do with knowledge. It is associated with the psychological need to usurp positions of political authority. Standpoint theorists do not primarily aim at gaining knowledge, but at overthrowing the patriarchal social structure.

Harding, in fact, anticipates this charge of ethnocentrism, she has ready answers. She points out that the category “woman” is not to be interpreted as comprising feminist standpoint theorists only. The category includes many other oppositional women’s lives – which contemporarily cannot even dream of acquiring and misusing power. Privileged women, who are not prostitutes and have never been raped, recommend thought to begin from the lives of prostitutes and rape victims, because they reveal the masculine aspect of the state. The state trivializes violence against women just as men do. Harding’s second contention is that centrally located men also have considered it suitable to begin thought from marginalized lives. Hegel, for instance, considers the activities of the slaves to be the best locations of acquiring knowledge of the social order; Marx, Engels, Lukacs maintain that the lives of the proletariats are informative of politics and economics. Many male feminists also appreciate the suggestion of beginning thought from women’s lives.
As pointed out earlier, this argument repudiates the charge of gender bias or ethnocentrism in Harding more effectively than the charge of epistemological inadequacy. To reinforce the essential cognitiveness of such claims, it is necessary to monitor the logic of justification through a thorough-going empiricism. Standpoint might reveal distortions in scientific theories, but it is not sufficient to sketch the outlines of hard-core natural sciences. Experience gained by inhabiting the marginalized standpoint might enhance certain feminine skills also. But these skills do not amount to knowledge proper. The proper evaluation of these skills is possible only through a contrast to mainstream knowledge claims, secured through experience. Reference to empiricism assumes proportions of an overbearing necessity to sustain standpoint theories.

In addition to the difficulty outlined, another problem concerning feminist standpoint epistemology concerns the vagueness and indecisiveness of the latter’s relation to mainstream epistemology. It officially proclaims a radical distinction from hegemonic epistemological politics and suggests a complete replacement of it. Areas of overlap, however, resist theorization. In the first place, an oscillation is detectable in Harding’s attitude. At times, she records her strong dismissal of the weak proposal of “add women and stir”20, and endorses full replacement of dominant theories by feminist theories. This is manifest in her comments that dominant voices are “powerful tides against which women must swim”21, in her assertion of “the superiority of starting research from
lives of women rather of men in the dominant groups.” She also expresses her condemnation of dominant epistemology in a noticeably weaker form, disapproving to initiate thought “only” or merely from the standpoint of the dominant class. Moitra interprets Harding as preferring to perpetuate the Euro-centric North-American scientific legacy, with a redistribution of cognitive authority, so as to empower women. She adduces the following remark by Harding as indication of Harding’s attitude: “Why not, instead, think of objectivity as indigenous resource of the modern North? It needs updating, rehabilitation, so that it is capable of functioning effectively in the science-based society that the North has generated and that many now say is its major culture export.”

One of the problems associated with this kind of oscillation is an inconsistency of thought. Another is the difficulty of deciphering whether standpoint theory is to be interpreted as an addition to and a reorganization of mainstream epistemology, or as a proposal of a complete revision and replacement of it. Besides, allegiance to the scientific model of the North poses a problem to the plan of decentralization of knowledge. There are many alternative, competing models to the Euro-centric ones.

Any project of inclusion of the marginalized standpoint in ways acceptable both to the marginalized and to the mainstream knowers is almost impossible to work out. The concept of oppression itself labours under the totalizing effect of the researchers, who tend
to reduce all experience into the single integrated framework of the oppressor/oppressed. The researcher identifies the needs of the oppressed and assumes the needs to be homogeneous. The success of the emancipatory theory is subsequently judged with reference to the researcher’s norms.

Bat-Ami-Bar-On27 points out that advocacy of epistemic privilege presupposes authorization of speech. Speech needs to be authorized only to silence a section of people. It is also devised to ensure obedience to the one whose speech has been authorized. It is not suitable for a marginalized group, for it can neither silence nor command obedience from a dominant group. It lacks the political power to achieve the results of authorization. Moreover, empowering the marginalized is possible only by invocation of values peculiar to the dominant group. If it claims exemption from such values, the question arises whether the exemption itself is based on force and epistemic power. Ideal speech situations are impossible, except in societies free of domination.

Bat-Ami-Bar-On28 also points out that the existence of multiple oppressed groups creates a problem in attribution of epistemic privilege. If each marginalized group is construed to be equally privileged, the attribution of privilege or superiority makes no sense. Hence, the question of selection of centrality arises. It is possible that all principles of selection of centrality involve hegemonic violence.
Sandra Harding is of the opinion that no single standpoint or position is available, which yields value-free reliable knowledge. Some standpoints are more reliable than others. I agree with Helen Longino on the point that robust social theory is needed in determining which standpoint is truly privileged in comparison to others. Feminist standpoint epistemology is not corroborated by an adequate social theory of the requisite kind. In the absence of social theory, a plurality of incompatible epistemic locations may make their presence felt, bringing about a chaotic disorder among incompatible knowledge-claims. Alternatively, a principle of integration may be utilized to harmonize these conflicting claims into a unity. Loss of multiple standpoints, however, would divest standpoint epistemology of its identity and significance. Longino further points out that these locations do not condition subjectivity isolatedly. An individual finds herself situated in a multidimensional social background, characterized by power asymmetry. In a male dominated society, she points out, sexual asymmetry prevails; other kinds of asymmetry are obvious in race, class, caste dominated societies. Heterosexuality institutes another kind of power asymmetry. An individual finds herself positioned in a multi-dimensional perspective, conditioned by asymmetrical power politics. In a context so complicated, it is epistemologically more important to articulate the processes by which these individuals or subjects acquire beliefs and knowledge.
Feminist standpoint epistemology lacks arguments to stipulate a particular kind of subjectivity as epistemically more privileged. Defence of any position as superior in terms of an a-priori argument is not acceptable. Such an argument specifies a particular ontological description of the world as real, and pinpoints an exclusive kind of subjectivity as fit to know the really real. The problem with this kind of subjectivity is that it is defined in relation to a certain vision of reality, which itself awaits justification. Alternatively, i.e., in the absence of an antecedently fixed world view, an unconditioned interpretation of subjectivity, peculiar to classical and logical empiricism has to be fixed. Such subjectivity is practically unattainable.

Standpoint epistemology needs to be appreciated for highlighting social values, gender ideologies, embodied experiences, affective determinations in generating knowledge. It also perceives the intimacy between politics and knowledge production. It causally analyses how different kinds of politics and power manipulations give rise to different kinds of knowledge claims. It cannot, yet, be considered as acceptable, as it is insufficiently argumentative. As just mentioned, it does not argue why it prefers certain locations or subjectivities to others. It also lacks seriousness in envisioning the importance of the logic of justification. The arguments adduced by supporters of standpoint theories do not succeed in establishing that the theory is more epistemological than political or emotional. Though the production of knowledge claims is overwhelmingly
influenced by power politics, the reduction of epistemology to politics cannot be recommended. Though standpoint epistemologists maintain that marginal standpoints are not corrupted by power — the theoretical possibility of knowledge claims arising at such locations being vitiated by politics of the marginal, peripheral cannot be eliminated. Overdetermination by feminine and other marginal politics is also undesirable. Feminist standpoint epistemology lacks sufficiently strong arguments to rule out such overdetermination. Harding’s conviction that the standpoint of the marginalized is not corrupted by power, calls for scrutiny. In fact, there can be no pure epistemological position, untouched by power. A critical, empirical investigation of knowledge-claims is absolutely necessary. It would resist overdetermination of knowledge claims by any kind of politics — marginal or dominant. Harding considers such scrutiny unnecessary. Her judgment is not totally convincing.

I examine post-modern feminist epistemology in chapter five. It is interesting to investigate its characteristics, because it registers a totally different reaction to the concept of objectivity from the interpretations afforded by feminist empiricists and feminist standpoint epistemologists. It also carries the epistemological venture farthest from its representation of knowledge as justified true belief.
Notes and References


3. Ibid., p.110.


7. Ibid.


9. Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology, What is Strong Objectivity”.

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


17. Ibid, p.274.


22. Ibid. p.128.


25. Ibid.


28. Ibid.


30. Ibid., p.269.