Feminist standpoint theory and the question of experience

RESEARCH PROBLEM

This thesis investigates the possibility of a feminist critique of science. It works with the premise that the function of critique is tied to the conditions of knowledge production so that politics cannot be separated from epistemology. The hypothesis is for a model of knowledge that is perspectival but not conjectural. It proposes such a model of knowledge in contrast to the propositional model of knowledge that inheres in most dominant knowledge systems, including the modern western scientific. In order to evidence such a claim, it uses as allegory the lived experiences of women as valid contexts of knowledge, examining the role of the traditional birth attendant or dai in the reproductive health apparatus in India. The thesis sees such experience as an impasse in dominant systems of knowledge, and proposes that an interpretation of the visual clues available from such a location will afford not only a recognition of the dominance of knowledge systems but also the possibility of a different world. Such an act of interpretation, rather than a mere description or recounting of such experience, is needed to constitute a feminist standpoint. Finally, the thesis proposes that this work will involve a re-cognition of the registers of both feminism (conventionally understood as essentially a political activity), and of science (conventionally seen as knowledge produced neutrally). Such a lens will help me re-open the debates around experience and its given place in feminism in a manner that should have implications for a feminist standpoint epistemology.

CHAPTER DIVISION

This thesis does not propose an alternative system of knowledge – either culturally rooted or driven by sexual difference – but a more valid model. It is not interested, therefore, in investigating different canons of knowledge. Chapter 1 examines the emergence of Western science and its overlap with critiques in Anglo-American contexts. It primarily asks two questions – one regarding the methodological vantage points of various critiques of science, and the other regarding the function and foundation of critique itself.
Chapter 2 shows how feminism as perspective becomes one of the foundations of feminist critiques of science in the Indian context.

Chapter 3 delineates the framework of hybridity and the way it is used in postcolonial scholarship to describe the object of critique – Western science – as fragmented. It concentrates on the discipline of history that contained most critical science studies exercises in India, in order to put on board the further question – is this an adequate starting point for a critique of science?

Chapter 4 looks at the critiques of mainstream development that use the framework of hybridity. This is a site where science and its critiques are operationalised, and is also a space where a certain methodology of critique – political and epistemic – is most visible. Such a methodology is couched in the metaphorical language of revolution but actually uses empirical acts of resistance as evidence of the hybrid nature of domination. An interrogation of this methodology of critique is set out in this chapter.

Chapter 5 examines the arguments within feminism and gender work that explain science as a political institution. These arguments understand the political as contained in a discussion about power; they move from understanding power as coherent, singular and monolithic, to having a more disaggregated character that also then demands a disaggregated response. The basis for this discussion I have set up in Chapter 2, where I talk about the parallel shift from a politics based on ideology to one that pays attention to micro-negotiations, one that proposes thickness of description as the alternative to ideology. It is such an alternative that pays attention to context or situation, as also to experience, and in Chapter 5 I examine the case for situated knowledges, for experience as the condition of knowledge-making. Chapter 5 adopts a different approach to women’s lived experiences from the earlier one, however, not relying on description of these alone to build an alternative narrative to that of neutral knowledge systems, but proposing such experience as an impasse or aporia to dominant systems that needs to be interpreted for the articulation of a feminist standpoint epistemology.