“Feminism means being in a position to have choices”

Arunndhati Roy’s complex critique of power targets the multiple dimensions of sociopolitical life, within local and global contexts. In her writings she says she asks:

Some very uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our visions for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our democratic institutions, the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community (2001, 198).

Through analyses of empire and neocapitalism, nuclear politics, communalism she looks at how practices of marginalization, distortion and erasure are implicated within diverse systems of power. Behind her multipronged attack is the understanding that though these practices vary in their specific contexts, the subjectivities they engender have deep seated epistemological connections. Involved in mixed gender and feminist groups, Roy’s critique is grounded in the liberal tradition and the belief that all humans are free and equal as individuals. Yet this does not stop her from critiquing liberal institutions like the state, family, private property, judiciary and religion. This operates within the premise that feminism too is rooted in the conceptual space of the liberal tradition, although it does not completely endorse its practices, focusing as it does on the discriminatory systems bred within it. In her writing Roy’s engagement with issues comes with the conviction that gender does not stand in isolation from other axes of oppression and social stratification, even as her presence in the debates on neoimperialism does not always foreground women.

New Social Movements are sites of democratic struggle challenging globalized power relations that have rendered the promise of democracy hollow. Within
their critical spaces activists from diverse political commitments, participate in dialogue, debate, and exchange ideas, as contradictory impulses within positions are sought to be negotiated to bring about positive social change through political coalitions. This is seen in the politics of the multi movement WSF (World Social Forum) that aims at a combative 'globalization from below'. The WSF is seen as 'a socially horizontal space' and a 'village square without an owner', as its debates represent a variety of ideological and political positions not tied to any single issue or event. The global justice movement that propels the WSF is more nuanced in its approach than traditional Marxism and does not see progressive struggle as happening solely on a single front (e.g. relations of production), but instead tries to deal with politics and economics through their complex dynamics.

The movements against global neocapitalism and their discourses are seen accommodating spaces for women's issues with the recognition that women are both marginalized and also actively mobilized by the contemporary wave of neoliberal globalization. This has opened spaces for women activists and their organizations as serious players on the political stage, not as outsiders but from within the networks of the global justice movement. This has been ensured not only through the active participation of women in different cadres and groups but also as a result of their significant leadership positions within the movement.

The participation of women, as leaders and as representatives of grassroots movements at Porto Alegre holds real promise; so also, does the involvement of feminist organizations in the organizational networks that constitute local "anti-globalization" forces. Thirty years ago, it would have been unthinkable, even within radical social movements, to have women in leadership over men or to have issues of gender oppression anything other than a matter, at best, for a woman's auxiliary. The organizations that command the most widespread
respect for their militancy, revolutionary vision, and courage are deeply
influenced by feminism – in their political agendas and their leadership cadres
(Brenner 2003).

Naomi Klein author of No Logo and one of globalization’s keenest analyzers also
feels that the globalized struggles against corporatization have developed out of
movements such as feminism and that there is no loss or dilution of its ideology
in aligning with broader agendas for global social justice:

There’s been growing awareness that recognizing the power of capital does not
mean saying that gender and race no longer matter, quite the opposite, they
matter more than ever (Klein Interview Thomas 2002, 49).

Women like Naomi Klein, Maud Barlow, Susan George, Vandana Shiva and
Arundhati Roy are at the forefront of struggles against neocapitalism, even as
some parallels and similarities in the claims of these movements and the existing
women’s movements can be seen. Many feminist activists have from the
beginning been part of these new regional and global movements that found
their most enduring expression in the WSF. Among the 112 regional or global
organisations making up the ‘International Council’, nine are feminist networks.
As Judy Rebick elaborates, quoting the well known American feminist Gloria
Steinem:

A couple of years ago, I asked Gloria Steinem whether she was concerned that
young women seemed more attracted to the anti globalization movement than to
the women’s movement. Her reply was, "The anti globalization movement is the
women’s movement" (2002, 24).

There has been a conscious attempt at inserting a strong feminist component and
approach vis-à-vis the WSF and according to America Vera-Zavala, an active
member of the “Global Justice Movement”, the results of this were visible during the 2004 Mumbai chapter:

One of the largest and most important panels – perhaps the most significant of all – was called “Wars against Women, Women against Wars”. There, Arundhati Roy did one of the most beautiful things one can do: she gave away space, space that she had fought for to get, that today she can access in a privileged way. She spoke mostly about the massacre in Gujarat, but also about women doing horrible things to other women. And then she spoke less, to give space to another woman, to tell her story about police brutality. That made me think about our Achilles’ heel: women not showing solidarity with other women. If more women followed Arundhati Roy’s example, more women would become visible and be heard. Something happened in Mumbai that makes this year’s forum deserve to be named the World Women’s Forum (2004).

Dianne Matte, Coordinator of the “World March of Women” believes that feminist participation in the WSF would be fundamental in firming the relations between the feminist movement and the movement for another globalisation. This would mean inscribing within it priorities from the feminist project which would in turn strengthen the possibilities for a real social transformation, as she states, “Another world, without feminism, is impossible” (Emphasis mine. 2003, 202).

There is thus a critical assumption that feminist goals have to become intrinsic to the progressive nature of the struggle against neoliberalism. This conjoining of goals and aspirations between diverse movements is seen even in India as sections of the women’s movement challenge the neoliberal/neocapitalist drive of successive governments in the country. Nivedita Menon writing on gender and politics in India cites the resolution of the “Sixth National Conference of Women’s Movement” that opposed the development model adopted by the
state, as being an ecological and socioeconomic disaster, serving only the interests of the dominant class/caste groups:

The resolution recognized struggles like those against the Narmada Dam and the mechanized aquaculture at the Chilka Lake, against nuclear bases and against the promotion of the tourist industry at the cost of the ecological balance. Such struggles, it was stated, present alternative modes of managing natural resources which are more equitable as well as being ecologically sustainable. The New Economic Policy is sharply criticized by the resolution for its assumption that the path of maximum profit for capital is the best course for economic development...All marginalized sections are being further exploited in the interests of capital (1999, 21-22).

In confronting neoimperial globalization, feminists while remaining connected to the local and the immediate, are aware that affiliations with transnational struggles would help broaden the base of their political agendas. This is based on the belief that women’s issues are bound up and enmeshed in a network of political, economic, religious, regional and other determinants. There is cognizance also of the multiple subjugated positions that women occupy through intersections of class, caste, religious, and regional specificities. Within this a significant portion of the work on gender and society is not derived from feminist scholarship alone, but from other studies of progressive thinking on broader issues of social justice. These are the connections that form a meshwork thereby enabling activists such as Roy in the forging of an emancipatory politics of alliance with different movements:

Though the experiences of women are different, the fact is that the fight is not being fought separately by women and men. There are plenty of men who see that side and there are plenty of women who don't. The battle lines are not
drawn between women and men. They are drawn between particular world views (Roy Interview Kolhatkar, 2007).

There is in Roy’s statement the recognition of the integral constitutive presence of women within the agendas of struggles that she speaks through, even if the issues are not entirely woman-centric. This is a position that’s explored by feminist scholars in “The Study of Gender in India”:

At least three overlapping dimensions are relevant for understanding how gender is conceptualized in the Indian context. First, there is a tension between scholars who have foregrounded gender and those who adopted a more intersectional approach. Second, the epistemological roots of work on gender are not inevitably based on feminism. Third, there is a considerable emphasis on the role of the nation-state and international structures in fostering gender inequalities (Purkayastha et al 203, 505).

Indian feminist activists like Iliana Sen, Gabriele Dietrich and Gail Omvedt who work in collaboration with other social movements believe that the women’s movement needs to go beyond women’s issues, while retaining women’s perspectives in struggles that engage with issues of development, ecology, and religion. Omvedt’s main argument is that new social movements present a challenge to both nationalist and Marxist visions of change in India and in the process reinvent the idea of revolution:

They have been explicitly antisystemic in their ideologies, looking towards a casteless, nonpatriarchal, nonlooting, sustainable society; they are involved, in their own view, in inherent conflict with the social order (1993, 318).

According to Purkayastha et al:
The new model of politics, unlike the earlier nationalist or Marxist ones, focuses on the relations of exploitation rather than relations of production. It redefines exploitation to include issues of caste, gender, rural livelihoods, and the environment; it develops new participatory and nonhierarchical organizations; and it articulates new understandings of development that question the industrial/capitalist international model and provide community-based alternatives based on equality and justice (3003, 513).

This has been dismissed by certain sections of the women’s movement as a diffusing of feminist political goals. They see it as a conceding in to the demands made by critics and hardliners on Indian feminism in keeping with traditional stereotypes that still dictate that women’s movements should be ‘self effacing’. This is the extreme reaction evoked by the movement’s privileging of only women’s issues, within the strident demand that there are other urgent issues of inequality that glaringly exist in India. Dipankar Gupta in “Feminification of Theory” accuses feminist studies of shutting itself in and insulating itself from intersubjective communication and interpretation, concerning itself only with “how women give life, about childbirth, about menstruation” (1995, 620), ignoring those areas where women interface with men. Thus when women activists make noise about women’s issues, they are most often asked to ‘backburner’ their demands, put aside their concerns in the name of the ‘greater’ cause. Views such as these exert a pressure upon women to deny what are seen as self centered narratives and thereby modify and enlarge their involvement to include issues that affect the general populace. Issues construed as common to men and women tend to be seen as ‘issues,’ while women’s issues are only that, specific to women and not seen as benefiting men. Implicated in this is also the reality of Indian women who are often forced to act out stereotypical notions of femininity that involve the privileging of sacrifice, selflessness and devotion to issues other than their own:
Towards the close of the nineteenth century, and even in the early decades of the twentieth century, a very influential ethic among both men and women was that of self-sacrifice. While a certain Hindu ‘tradition’ was invented and invoked to justify this imagination, what made the figure of the ‘new woman’ fundamentally democratic was the insistence — utopian to be sure, but heard in all reformist literature — that all acts of sacrifice be absolutely voluntary (Majumdar 2002, 21).

In this context struggles for the ‘self’ are viewed as both an indulgence and an aberration initiated by an elite section of Indian women. In the case of Roy’s participation in mixed gender struggles such as the NBA’s, her politics cannot be read as succumbing to pressures such as these. She unstintingly supports the importance of women’s concerns within social justice movements, “A political struggle that does not have women at the heart of it, above it, below it, and within it, is no struggle at all” (2006, 351-352). There is a commitment to struggles that include women through their participation as well in the movement’s engagement with issues that concern them:

I think that in all these issues one writes about — models of development, the “war on terror” — it’s the vulnerable who are hardest hit, and that means the chances are higher they will be women. It’s sometimes said that the women’s movement has fragmented, compared with the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. In recent anti-war protests, for example, it’s the voices of various social movements — the Anti-War Coalition especially, in this country — that have been most clearly heard. I think it’s true that the notion that women have won huge victories is an illusion — though not entirely so. But should women have separate protests against the Iraq war? Since I’ve been here, and meeting people who don’t know me, I’ve met amazing levels of macho chauvinism, big-boyism: it’s taken a lot not to burst out laughing sometimes. We’re also faced with the bimbo women more than one could ever have dreamt possible. It’s consumerism
feeding into feminine insecurity. All you need to be paranoid is to know the facts (Roy Interview Macfarlane 2003).

Roy’s presence in movements against global neocapitalism, nuclear disarmament and communalism among others does not take away from her involvement in women’s groups in India like the “Committee Against Violence on Women” (CAVOW), that raise awareness against core women’s issues like violence against them. In January of 2007, she released a report of a fact-finding team which had visited the Dantewada region of Chhattisgarh following complaints that the *Salwa Judum* campaign was perpetuating violence, molestation and rape on tribal women. At the meeting attended by well known activists like Ilina Sen and Uma Chakravarty and the National Commission for Women’s Chairperson, Malini Bhattacharya, Roy warned that the oppression unleashed by the Indian state in its bid to acquire land and displace tribals from their traditional habitat would lead to violent reactions and outbursts, resulting in more lumpen violence against women. As she says, “In any exercise of violence women are immediately marginalized” (*Ibid*, 2003). This critical judgment informs her engagement with issues of social inequity that takes note of women as victims of violence at both community and state levels and her activist intervention in contexts such as CAVOW. This focus also provides for a strategic framing for mobilizing a global alliance with feminist activism and interventions. Within issues of violence the displacement of tribals and ecological exploitation are seen as extensions of globalization’s drive to both privatize and corporatize. Thus gender based inequalities have taken a turn for the worse, with economic

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*Salwa Judum* is a controversial anti-Naxalite, government supported, civil militia formed in 2005, to bring the area dominated by Naxalites back under government control. According to *The Times of India*, April 3 2008, “Surveys by civil society groups have indicated that the movement has been a coercive affair and hardly the voluntary effort the state government claims it to be. It is high time the government recognised the disastrous impact the Salwa Judum has had on the people. Since its inception in 2005, over 50,000 villagers have been displaced from their homes and deprived of livelihoods. Large parts of the state are in a state of civil war... Efforts like Salwa Judum and laws like Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act do not help in the formation of a civil society”.
globalization not meeting its emancipatory potential as had been advocated by the neoliberal soothsayers:

When movements become violent, then not only does the state react with huge coercive power, but that violence by people on your own side is very soon turned on women. So because we have this legacy, I think, in places like the Narmada valley, women also realize that they are far bigger victims than the men are. Say, a hundred thousand people are being displaced by a dam and they’re not being given land for land, because there is no land. The men are given some cash as compensation. The men buy motorcycles or get drunk, and then it’s finished. And the women are left in a terrible situation. So they are fighting this battle much more fiercely. And everywhere you go you see that they’re really at the forefront of it (Roy Interview Barsamian 2004).

Roy was also an important signatory along with other well known activists and scholars like Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi and Gayatri Spivak, Hélène Cixous of the “One Million Signatures Campaign” in Iran in 2006 to end discriminatory laws against women. The campaign’s intent was to collect one million signatures to present to the National Parliament as a popular mandate to reform laws that accord lesser rights to women in matters such as inheritance, marriage, divorce, employment, and legal testimony. In her involvement with the many progressive issues that she writes on with exhaustive research and passion, and her very vocal interventions in public debates, Roy does display a sensitivity to classic women’s issues such as violence against them, but there is a claim that broader issues like nuclearization and war, religion and communalism, globalization and displacement are also women’s issues, even as they impact all of humanity.

Globalization has not always been revolutionary in terms of its capability to overcome the negative aspects of traditional society, as it often opportunistically expands and entrenches previous forms of exploitation and oppression. The
language and framework of anti-globalization organizing also provide a way to identify and articulate the impact that neoliberal economic restructuring has had on women, by showing that patterns of gender inequities are not inevitable but are in fact the product of particular policies and politics. Critics of globalization point out that although women across the globe, and most particularly in the Third World, are an over represented category at the lower end of the socioeconomic demographic, there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that it is also women who are most negatively impacted upon when Third World nations have deemed it necessary to engage in large scale processes of economic restructuring. With the expansion of transnational capital, factories in countries like India have employed large numbers of women. This was convenient in the interest of capital as it was assumed that women were more suitable, firstly for their 'nimble fingers', and secondly for their docile nature which would prevent them from forming unions to challenge work conditions. Feminist accounts have exposed the gendered assumptions of dominant scripts of globalization by highlighting the contradictory relationship between transnational capital, state policies and gender relations. As Gita Sen of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) says:

Within the most progressive sections of the women's movement, there is a tacit understanding that the ideal line to take runs between these two extremes: that is, women should ally with movements for social justice, but struggle within them to change gender practices and understanding (2005, 4).

The alliances created would build coalition partners for greater visibility and effectiveness, even as in some feminist traditions, solidarities are in themselves seen as strategies to effect change. With this belief, Roy engages with networks for advocacy and activism vis-à-vis women's issues, even as her presence in an
array of political practices underscores her commitment to social justice struggles. According to the feminist critic Amrita Basu:

Some women’s struggles form a subset of struggles for civil rights and human rights. What initially motivates many women to organize is not necessarily a belief in the distinctive nature of their problems but rather a sense of shared oppression with other groups that have been denied their rights (1995, 10).

Feminism as a theory imbues a political consciousness into critical spaces that helps women to engage with power and political life around. For this reason, the link between the global justice movement and feminism is particularly strong. The analysis and evaluation of the impact of feminist transformative strategies has been used with some success for decades in the construction of knowledge about society in general and the functioning of power relations in particular. This is why women engaged in different projects and struggles have continued to engage with feminism as an enabling term. Feminists assert that the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized must become central to any discourse around globalization.

The strength of Women’s Studies was always that it was ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world and that it envisioned democratic/socialist praxis and addressed questions of social and economic justice (Mohanty 2006, 13).

Feminist analysis of globalization argues that in order to bring about truly radical, holistic, and empowering social change, the perspectives of those who have been most marginalized and disempowered under the exploitative force of neocolonial, patriarchal capitalism must be central to an articulation of alternatives to globalization. A powerful way to challenge the domination of globalization would thus be to develop feminist, antiracist, democratic, and
generally non-oppressive models that would provide a significant space for the construction of representative, inclusive, and egalitarian alternatives.

The underlying discourse of inclusion and acceptance of diversity within the antiglobalization movements has generated efforts to create a wide range of opportunities for people to participate in.

Globalization – highly unequal in reach and impact – divides at the same time as it integrates. As such, it is a threat, but it is also a possibility and a promise. Precisely because it has been hijacked for hegemonic and partisan purposes, globalization is a disputed terrain (Vargas 2003, 906).

Spaces within globalization also offer new modes of feminist politics, for instance the ability to enter into transnational alliances. In contrast to the male-dominated national state and the fundamentalist movements, key institutions of the neoliberal order like the World Bank, proclaim their support for modernization and democratization. Offering resources for women’s economic development efforts, social services, and health care organizations, the managers of the new world economic order, present themselves as allies of liberal feminism. Core feminist aspirations - full political citizenship, equal access to education and occupational opportunity, and an end to the culturally and legally authorized right of the patriarchal order to control women’s bodies and sexuality, are projected as inherently compatible with neoliberalism. Within this narrative it is pointed out that the forces that have the most to lose from the institutionalization of liberal feminism’s political goals are organizations threatened by the loss of older forms of patriarchal, political and economic power. This is seen in right wing idealizations of religion or a ‘pure’, steeped-in-tradition past, both offering choices only between paternalism and patriarchalism. Yet although the spawning of a neoliberal order promises women more room to engage in public
life and to contest with men for power and place, it does not guarantee gender
equality in the future. Further, its emancipatory promise always rides second to
its own profit making ideal. Thus it remains imperative upon women’s groups to
see the real reasons and meaning behind the neoliberal order’s support of
women’s issues and thereafter stay ahead of its exploitative subtext by using and
discarding what is on offer according to their own agendas and needs.

Locally and internationally, feminists continue to face the difficult and pressing
issue of how to argue for and define women’s rights in a way that does not align
feminism with neocolonial relations of domination. As Johanna Brenner
succinctly states:

> Whether feminism will come to inform the radical vision and the everyday
> politics of global justice activists, men and women, depends on how well the
> movements are able to sustain political coalitions that are participatory and
> willing to engage in dialogue. Movements that make a space for the political and
> strategic interventions of working-class and popular feminist activists and their
> organizations will constitute a powerful pole of attraction, an alternative for
> those who now believe they have no choice but to compromise with the neo-
> liberal order (2003).

Negative effects of economic restructuring and globalization on women need to
be studied to help women make critical choices, not between two opposing
forces, but through critiques of the power variables and the differential effects
within each of them to find solutions that fit. This is echoed by Brenner as she
sees modernizing impulses within globalization as being both liberatory and
exploitative:

> Women in the Third World are forced to contest two powerful and opposing
> forces. On the one side is a masculinist nationalism that selectively defines
tradition and nation in ways that force women to be the bearers of cultural
difference, while men are free to participate in the world of modern political and
economic power. On the other side is transnational capital that in its current
phase threatens to overpower the national state and subject women along with
men to new forms of economic exploitation or even to exclude them from the
economy altogether -- at the same time that it offers opportunities for escaping
from traditional male control (Ibid).

In a search for alternatives Roy has also been conscious of the danger of
romanticizing tradition and continuity even as she launches a sustained attack on
a world order changing according to the dictates of empire:

What is interesting is that a lot of the women who are involved in resistance
movements and who are activists are also redefining what 'modern' means. They
are really at war against their communities, on the one hand, and against the
kind of modernity that is being imposed on the global economy, on the other.
They decide what they want from their own tradition and what they will take
from modernity. (Interview Barsamian 2008, 112)

There have been gains for women and the women's movement within a
globalized space that cannot be discounted, which is why she makes clear that
she is not "an anti development junkie or a proselytizer for the eternal upholding
of custom and tradition" (Roy 2000) but a critic of neoliberalism's skewed politics
and policies. Talking of her own childhood in an oppressively patriarchal
community, she says:

I spent the first part of my life just fighting tradition, just refusing to be the
woman that the community that I come from wants me to be. And you escape
that and you come slap-bang up against some that, it's hard to say which is
worse (Interview Kolhatkar 2004).
In this there is a rejection both of the deeply embedded ancient patriarchal hierarchies that Indian society protects and the existence of current forms of global neocapitalist enterprise that exploits and marginalizes women:

The irony for some women is that, on the one hand, the supporters and promoters of a globalized world economy are often also the ones who support the breaking of traditional patriarchal orders. On the other hand, some of those who oppose globalization do so in the name of values and control systems that strongly oppress women. The challenge for women, therefore, is how to assert the need for both economic justice and gender justice in an increasingly globalized world, in which at the same time we witness the proliferation of diverse forms of moral conservatism that systematically target women's self-determination (Sen and Correa 2000).

Feminist scholars are thus caught in a bind, while they articulate the disempowering effects of a tradition sanctioned patriarchal oppression, they are also aware of the need to oppose the agenda of ruthless liberalization that global elites continue pursuing on the backs of women and the poor. Roy in tandem with anti neoliberalism activists challenges the dominant scripts of globalization by elaborating the gendered assumptions and effects that might be invisible in mainstream theories. This is necessary also to counter an unproblematized optimism that accompanies any call for inclusiveness, as attention needs to be paid to the tensions and rifts between disparate movement agendas within alliances:

The tension between social/economic justice and gender justice may be more deep-rooted in practice than women's organizations have recognized to date. The hard fact of the matter is that there is no simple congruence between the
three sites of women's oppression. Being on the side of the oppressed along one
dimension does not guarantee an equally progressive approach to other
dimensions of oppression. Being in favour of social/economic justice does not
guarantee that one is supportive of gender justice or that one even understands
what it entails. Conversely, being in favour of gender justice certainly does not
assure support for social/economic justice... The progressive (in gender terms)
sections of most social movements are not the strongest. Too many social
movements find it convenient to “use” women for their ends without addressing
gender relations. For women, the biggest challenge is one of political identity:
which identity should they choose as their primary one? And how is the choice
linked to a feminist social project? (Sen 2005, 5)

Dissatisfaction with the direction of a majority of anti globalization discourses
has also been taken up by feminist critics like Saskia Sassen. In *Globalization and
Its Discontents* (1998) she claims that mainstream accounts of globalization
emphasize technical and abstract economic dynamics and proceed as if they
were gender neutral, when they are not. These accounts operate through a
narrative of eviction, as they work to exclude a whole range of workers, firms
and sectors that do not fit the prevalent masculinized images of globalization.
Even though the number of women in top-level global economic activities is
growing, it is a world that is gendered in that its cultural properties and power
dynamics have historically been associated with powerful men. Catherine Eschle
(2005) also points out the exclusionary hierarchies within the movement and the
fact that any integration of feminist concerns into antiglobalization discourses
remains dependent solely on the concrete presence of self-declared feminists.

Within a recognition of these ambiguities inherent in the anti globalization
movement Roy’s politics goes beyond a conventional understanding of the
political, extending from an understanding that there are problematic positions
that need to be negotiated both within and between movements. That is to say,
the strength and power of her activism comes from not being a single politics that is articulated everywhere and every time in the same way. To see within this an affiliation with feminism in her position/s is also not far fetched, for feminism is not a political metanarrative in the way Marxism for instance is, and so to expect a singular feminist politics is not to recognize the diversity and divisions within it. Feminism designates a diverse set of practices, concerns, and approaches and there are spaces it engenders that are capable of creating alliances with other progressive politics. This is echoed by Indian feminists with reference to the anti globalisation movements as well:

In the past two decades, feminists have either had dual memberships in the women's movements and in another social movement or have directly joined a social movement like the antiwar or antiglobalization campaigns. Their personal strategizing comes from the belief in the need for a convergence of different theoretical perspectives and the formulation of a global and combined struggle for a better world. But the process of participation and collaboration with social movements has not been easy for feminists. They have had to struggle to infuse their feminism and issues within other theoretical and strategic goals (Gandhi and Shah 2006, 74).

In Roy’s engagement and involvement are contexts shaped by fundamentalisms, globalisation and militarization, contexts with diverse dynamics that create their own oppressive practices as well as communities of resistance. Both in India and globally, multiple shifts have occurred in women’s struggles and they have had to invent equally multiple and innovative strategies and spaces of engagement to enter into new alliances with other social movements. Rather than appealing to identity or unity as a way of coming together, movements are seen making space for concerns shared beyond the essentialism of identity politics. Thus women may be found situated within mixed gender settings because they share political identities and some political interests with men. In India issues of class, caste,
ethnicity, religion and gender among other classifications offer multiple grounds for considering how identity is constructed. These are in turn operated upon by diverse structures that mutually construct each other creating intersectional systems of oppression. In this, gender issues are understood with reference to the multilingual, multicultural nature of India, leading to the development of different perspectives on gender, intersectionality, and power inequalities. Dovetailing this understanding with postmodernist trends for the deconstruction of categories, Indian feminists Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah organized the 'Inter Movement Dialogues' in 2004 in Mumbai and in 2005 in Porte Alegre during the WSF, as a methodology for a collective reflection to deepen theoretical connections and build bridges across movements:

Post modernists argue that fitting people into one box called gender or class or black do not correspond to the realities of people's lives and eventually leads to demarcation, exclusion and inequality. People have complex identities. They can be workers, dalits or lower castes; women, or members of religious groups. They have identities based on ethnicity or race, their sexual orientation, as trafficked women or prostitutes. They juggle a mix of these identities during their lives, in their decision-making and actions. Along with such multiple identities, there are also multiple discriminations and privileges. Racial discrimination and a disadvantaged position in the labour market are played out quite different for

2 The term "Intersectionality Theory" was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1970's, (Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, Stanford Law Review, (1991) Vol. 43, No. 6. p. 1241-1299.) but gained prominence in the 1990's when sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (Patrica Hill Collins. 1998. "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race and Nation." Hypatia. 13(3):62-82 63) reintroduced the idea as part of her discussion on black feminism. It grew out of the writing of Black feminists who argued that Western thinking about the interaction of race and gender systems was unsatisfactory since it tended to obscure those problems uniquely faced by Black women. Black feminists argued that their problems and experiences could not be described as the problems of Black men plus the problems of white women. Intersectionality theory is usually applied to the multiply subordinated, such as women of color, rather than the singly subordinated, such as middle-class heterosexual black men. Extending intersectionality theory to homosexual black men is seen as justifiable.
men and women as well as between women. Advantages and privileges in one context may be disadvantageous in another... Some activists who are aware of the different voices within their own movements are critical of versions of essentialisms that define people as a single group... As movement activists, we need to not only accept differences, diversity and plurality but try to incorporate these ideas within our movements and strategies (Ibid 73).

This bid to incorporate plurality to broaden their scope is within a postmodern rejection of all closed, stable categories of identity. There are more flexible positionings within this social, political and critical thought as movements look beyond an essentialism that aims at homogeneity. Thus individuals would have associations but not necessarily cadre affiliations with groups, as they detach themselves from any parochial, fixed and predetermined group based identity. This helps in the creation of strategic coalitions which are built around organizing on the grounds of shared interests and needs rather than essential identities. Within these amorphous and contingent groupings lie spaces that help in the production of new ways of thinking as also imagining new forms of action.

This is also a key concern in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s anthology, *Scattered Hegemonies: Post Modernistic and Transnational Feminist Practices*, as they see the need in feminist theory:

To articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies. Such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels (1994, 17).

This is tied to the fact that feminism too is not free of asymmetrical power relations, involving as it does, “forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity within which asymmetries and inequalities can be critiqued” (Ibid). Responding to these challenges, feminist theorists have worked at dismantling the rhetoric of
“global sisterhood.”³ As more and more women forged their own rhetoric of social change and asserted different ways of interpreting feminism, shared gender began to seem inadequate when compared to the power of local identities and local histories. However, relatively few theorists have advocated a complete retreat into fragmented, isolated feminist critiques. Transnational feminisms seek ways of setting up crucial transcultural alliances without either ignoring or eradicating the differences among women’s goals and beliefs. In Roy’s assertion, “I don't bother to label myself ... For me personally, feminism means being in a position to have choices” (Interview Macfarlane 2003), is a similar gesture that looks at available forms of critique of an unproblematicized feminist identity, beyond labels and appropriation. This does not suggest that she is ambiguously placed vis-à-vis the discourse of feminism, just that there is a negotiation that is kept open within its many strands and readings. This is also part of a larger phenomenon wherein many women choose not to identify themselves as feminists, despite holding beliefs predicated upon by general feminist ideologies, because of the term’s connection with the hegemonic and racist practices of mainstream (western) feminism.

This variance is evident also in Roy’s critique of dams and development in India, as she places it only tangentially in relation to contemporary ecofeminist literature. Ecofeminism explores the interconnections between the domination of nature and social inequalities, drawing connections between patriarchy and ecological degradation. In its theoretical analysis it focuses on the relationship between women and the environment as one that is central to both human survival and environmental integrity. Within this, contemporary systems of

³ Robin Morgan’s edited anthology The International Women's Movement Anthology (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), argued for a universal understanding of feminism by revitalizing the rhetoric of sorority that had long permeated the discourse of Western twentieth-century women's internationalism, resonating with the renewed emotional fervor of women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s.
power and control are seen as reflections of masculine values, which encourage the separation of (feminine) nature from (masculine) culture, and hence permit the treatment of women and the earth as resources to be controlled and exploited. While ecofeminism is profoundly subversive of contemporary dominant norms, Roy is aware that it nevertheless has its problematic areas. Ecofeminists tend both to essentialize women's nature and also romanticize their relationships with and commitment to the natural environment. Moreover, the ecofeminist emphasis upon lifestyle politics is also limited as it fails to provide an explicit program for political action. Roy's critique of the development model pursued by the Indian government with special reference to her involvement with the NBA, places her in closer contact with feminist environmentalists in India who do not call themselves ecofeminists. Her analysis does not place women in central positions within discourses of environmental regeneration, as they are seen as not being alone in having a special stake in it. This also negates the premise that what's good for the environment is good for women and vice versa. Also importantly, she does not advocate a retreat to indigenous social and knowledge systems which could further strengthen older systems of domination. Thus although she is critical of the current development model pursued by states like India, she does not edify or celebrate an older, traditional order. Nivedita Menon reiterates the same when she says:

The other space that feminism seeks to define will have to be marked by the continual refusal of choice-between tradition and modernity, between universal rights and cultural specificities, between individual uniqueness and community identity, between capitalist consumerism and the demonization of desire... Our politics has to remain flexible enough to seize the moment, whenever and however that moment may occur (2005, 226-227).
There is a complex field of negotiations through which Roy politically positions herself as she deliberates and critically engages with issues in her essays. Tradition versus modernity and other binaries are invoked not just in her writings on the Narmada, but also in her attack on American hegemonic practices. This informs her critique of America’s military intervention in West Asia as she connects it to the opportunism of American multinational corporates who are behind the grand gestures ostensibly aimed at freeing the region of despots and dictators. Critical of certain sections of the western media’s signaling of the intervention as one that would liberate women in Iraq and Afghanistan - “thanks to Bush and Blair, the twenty-first century’s leading feminists” (Roy 2006, 148), from the orthodoxies of Islam, she offers a trenchant dismissal, mocking the simplistic explanations offered, through an understanding that Islam like other cultures/religions is neither monolithic nor free of internal contradictions. In this she poses a counter to voices like those of America’s then first lady, Laura Bush, who used concern for the women of the region as a justification for the attack:

Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror ... because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan ... because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us ... Fighting brutality against women and children ... is the acceptance of our common humanity (2001).

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on America, the western mainstream media had immediately gone into overdrive in its bid to expose the ‘enemy’ through images of the ‘barbaric Muslim/other’. This is the reasoning that had created the moral high ground for the west to launch its offensive in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even iconic feminists like Elaine Showalter (2002) had exhorted women to
actively support western governments’ anti-terrorist operations as messianic to women’s rights in West Asia and outside.

As part of western propaganda, a British documentary “Beneath the Veil”, anchored by Saira Shah, was shown on American television showing a crouching Afghani woman covered from head to toe in a burqa, being publicly executed in a stadium in Afghanistan. Shah’s ethnicity and Muslim identity were used to add credibility to an exposé of a culture that was judged as being oppressive to women. The film’s overt message, delineated through stereotypical portrayals of Afghani men as brutally patriarchal, religious zealots, conformed to western notions of Islamic terrorists, while tacitly promoting a contrasting image of western culture as benevolent and tolerant. According to Avtar Brah:

This left little space for a critical feminist stance that could condemn the unnamed woman’s murder without demonizing Muslim populations as a whole (2002, 40).

Roy reiterates the same when she says,

Women of the world stand between two extremes, both represented by androcentrism, Rambo culture and patriarchy - Osama bin Laden and George Bush. Bin Laden reportedly has forty two wives and is a defender and instigator of Taliban-style hardline Islamic structural violence against women. Bush heads the most conservative American administration since Ronald Reagan, pursuing vested interests of the military-industrial complex and giant oil multinationals that exploit women in the Third World (Interview Chaulia 2002).

Thus the west’s interest in the women of Afghanistan operated only through dynamics of pity and voyeurism on the one hand and opportunism on the other. Ironically two years after the American troops had been in Iraq, BBC News reported that insecurity and instability of daily life in Afghanistan had
continued, seen in the increasing cases of rape and sexual violence by armed factions, as well as the public harassment of women who tried to take a role in politics. In fact the "Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan" (RAWA) had sought to draw the U.N.'s and the west's attention to violations against women's rights in Afghanistan before the September 11, 2001 attacks, but was unable to table it as a pressing issue of international concern until America timed its publicity to tally with its own "algebra of infinite justice". RAWA's opposition to the bombing campaign is not played alongside the tapes of Bin Laden for a simple reason: the women of Afghanistan take the view that violence is not the way to rid their war-ruined country and the world of injustice and oppression. RAWA's vision of an alternative global order is unacceptable to those determined to bring all countries into a co-optation of western values. Alternative visions of lasting peace and prosperity are thus silenced in order that the dominant perspective on global power relations remains privileged and unchallenged:

Little was ever said about women activists in Afghanistan or in exile; nor was their recognition of the wide swath of feminisms that exist within Islam. Instead the feminist rhetoric used by the Bush administration dominated the airwaves. This has very much to do with the way that the U.S. dominates globalized media in the first place. But it also has to do with the fact that much of the feminism in Islam is also anti-colonial, and anti-western. Most Muslim feminists who speak against the Taliban also speak against U.S. foreign policy... Most Muslim feminists argue that the U.S. must rethink its foreign policy as a whole, particularly in the middle east. The feminism that is publicized in and by the west silences these voices (Eisenstein 2004, 20-21).

4 This is also the title of Roy's well known essay that exposes America's politics and opportunism in launching its offensive in Afghanistan and later Iraq, published in a collection with the same name, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* Penguin: New Delhi, 2001.
The sophisticated contributions feminist thinkers have made to understanding 9/11, the Taliban and other fundamentalisms, as well as forms of organized masculinist violence, are critiques that Roy is alert to. Aware of and appreciative of RAWA's efforts and struggle, she says,

I think, of all the women's resistances, the most remarkable today is RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. What a tremendous battle they have waged and continue to wage. And what a principled battle ... They were faced with the Taliban and the Northern Alliance and the Americans in between. And we were made to feel that America was fighting a feminist war in Afghanistan. But look at their situation now. They didn't say, "Yes, yes, we'll support you and come in." At no point did they take an expedient position. I think we have to learn this from that (Interview Barsamian 2004).

Whether women in Afghanistan would be better off after the war is an open question and therefore part of a different argument. But the claim that the United States is a liberator of oppressed women rings hollow, contradicted as it is by the history of the U.S.'s support to fundamentalist regimes like the Taliban, during the Cold War period of the 1980s to combat the power and presence of the erstwhile U.S.S.R. in the region. Further the U.S.'s support of Saudi Arabia, where gender apartheid is almost as severe as it is under the Taliban exposes its opportunistic politics further.

In highlighting women as victims and ignoring the contributions of organisations like RAWA, many mainstream discourses use the politics of victimhood vis-à-vis women to position them as passive, incapable of agency. In her sharp rebukes Roy has called for reassessment of this gendered role playing that women are often forced to play out. In fact her first controversial essay on Shekhar Kapur's film Bandit Queen, "The Great Indian Rape-Trick 1" and its sequel "The Great Indian Rape-Trick 2" were searing attacks on the filmmaker
for his romanticized construction of Phoolan as a perpetual sexual victim turned avenging bandit, and his preoccupation with her victimization rather than with her subsequent empowerment - all in the name of feminism. She argues that the scriptwriters had erased all complexity out from Devi's life story, the fact, for example, that the initial injustice she suffered had nothing to do with sexual abuse, but was to do with the fact that her cousin had stolen her father's land:

[The film]transforms Phoolan Devi from being India's best-known bandit into history's most famous victim of rape... the minute she ceases to be a rapeable commodity, an armed vagina roving the ravines, the film loses interest in her and hurries to its close (Roy 1998).

This is a reading that recognizes that when women appear as strong protagonists in positions of power, advancing the narrative and thereby being central to the action, they are eventually brought down through twists and turns in the plot and an inevitability that underscores their fall. Roy highlights this fact when she criticizes the film for positioning Devi's life experience as only centered on the abuse she suffers at the hands of the men:

If you take a long hard look at the choices he [Shekhar Kapur] has made - at his inclusions, his omissions and his blatant alterations, a truly dreadful pattern emerges. Phoolan Devi (in the film version), has been kept on a tight leash. Each time she strays towards the shadowy marshlands that lie between Victimhood and Brutishness, she has been reined in. It is of consummate importance to the Emotional Graph of the film, that you never, ever, stop pitying her. That she never threatens the Power Balance (Roy 1994).

According to its filmmaker, Shekhar Kapur, Bandit Queen is based on the dictated diaries of Phoolan Devi as contained in Mala Sen's biography, India's Bandit
Queen and as a narrative he intended it to expose the structural inferiority of women and low castes in Hindu society. Roy in her critical essays on the film, written soon after the film’s release in 1994, questions both the veracity of Kapur’s claim of telling the story of Phoolan Devi with accuracy and more importantly, “whether or not somebody should have the right to restage the rape of a living woman without her consent” (Roy Interview Barsamian 2001). In this are, as she points out, embroiled questions of responsibility to a living woman and the politics of agency as attributed to her in the cinematic telling of her life. She accuses Kapur of misusing his interpretative license as far as Devi’s story goes, through certain omissions and deviations that she sees as deliberate:

While I watched this, I remember feeling that using the identity of a living woman, re-creating her degradation and humiliation for public consumption, was totally unacceptable to me. Doing it without her consent, without her specific, written repeated, whole-hearted, unambiguous, consent, is monstrous .... In their quest for Classic Cinema, they’ve stripped a human being of her Rights. Her Dignity. Her Privacy. Her Freedom (1994).

Roy also highlights the positioning of Devi within a narrative that uses rape as titillation under the garb of realism, even as critics classified the film as non mainstream/Bollywood thereby offering both an authentic and ‘realistic’ account of Devi’s story. Priyamvada Gopal in her feminist critique of the film agrees with Roy’s charges against it, accusing it once again of using its “hegemonic imagery” to partake in a claim for “avant-garde status”, while being no different in its depiction from “dominant and regressive ways of seeing women’s bodies” (2000, 302-303). For Roy the film is deeply problematic in its visual manipulation of violence and rape and for Kapur’s repackaging of Devi as rape victim within demands of rape-as-entertainment/spectacle, that have long been exploited by both mainstream, and what is perceived as ‘art house’ cinema in India. Gopal in
the same vein, accuses the film of participating “willy-nilly in pornographic discourse” (Ibid 302) studies have shown that viewing rape and other violent behaviour can desensitize the spectator to abuse of women and in some cases causes subsequently, an increase in the aggressive behaviour toward them:

Feminist scholars have done a particularly thorough job of exposing the voyeuristic depiction of rape that dominates films and media representations today. They have revealed the ways the film industry and/or feminist criticism reproduces the “ideology of rape” by depicting women as powerless and subordinated to the will of men (Mardorossian 2002, 746).

Contemporary feminist literature has strongly critiqued the dualistic thinking involved in stereotypical and essentialist arguments - of male strength and aggression versus female weakness and passivity. This has been pivotal in shifting feminist analysis towards more complex understandings of violence and victimhood. In Roy’s Booker winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, violence is centrally positioned and viewed through the twin lens of gender and caste in contemporary India. According to Susan Stanford Friedman,

[ Roy’s] integration of gender and caste into the story of the nation particularly as this story involves violence performed, tacitly sanctioned, or ignored by the state, demonstrates how feminist geopolitics engages locationally that is to say, spatially with power relations as they operate both on the nation and within the nation (2001, 117).

The novel offers a critique of patriarchy controlled institutions like the family and marriage and the disastrous consequences this has on the lives of marginals like women, lower castes and children. The narrative can be read as an analogue to the conversations occurring within feminist discourse, as it explores the milieu and aspirations of the central female character, Ammu. Roy’s novel is clearly

117
feminist in its integration of the personal and the social and in its exposure of society’s gendered understanding of the ‘good woman’ in the Indian context. As the divorced daughter, Ammu occupies a marginal position within the family; economically dependent on her brother Chacko, and culturally bound by the strictures of the small, feudal and patriarchal community that expects complete submission in return for membership within its stifling confines. Occupying a central position in Roy’s exploration of the subaltern existence, she becomes one of the ‘small things’ – one of many peripheral and near invisible creatures, that constitute the subject of the novel. As a young woman Ammu is the ‘difficult daughter’, rebellious and defiant of social codes:

As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them (1997, 181).

In India tradition dictates that girls are temporary guests in their parents’ homes and on account of being a non investment for the family, it does not seem important to spend money on their education. Thus while the son, Chacko, is sent to Oxford, Ammu is forced to stay home and not sent to College. Further this neglect is skewed as the family even ignores its traditional responsibility of finding her a husband:

Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl... Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu’s way. Two years went by. Her eighteenth birthday came and went. Unnoticed, or at least unremarked upon by her parents. Ammu grew desperate. All day she dreamed of escaping from the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother (Ibid 38).
In a bid to escape and put a distance between herself and her family she runs away from home and marries a man outside the community. The short, unsuccessful marriage to an abusive and alcoholic man ends in divorce when he tries to prostitute her to his boss in return for his job. Ammu challenges this deeply hierarchical and patriarchal society through her non conformism, one that she passes on to her daughter Rahel. Rahel survives the antagonistic indifference and neglect of her maternal family after the death of her mother by escaping from the stifling confines of the family home into an unconventional life. The impact of her return twenty-three years later is left ambiguous within a transgressive mode.

Roy’s novel also shows women themselves colluding with patriarchal norms, seen in the bitter and malignant Baby Kochamma:

Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman...She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter - according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage - Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject (Ibid, 45-46).

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy looks at how women’s social position in India is informed by laws that guarantee inheritance rights favouring the male. This goes a long way in creating prejudices against daughters, who are seen as interlopers even in their parental homes after marriage. The servant Kochu Maria tells the divorced Ammu’s twin children, Rahel and Estha:
Tell your mother to take you to your father’s house... There you can break as many beds as you like. These aren’t your beds. This isn’t your house. (Ibid, 83)

This reiterates the exclusion of the daughter as well as of her children, for within the extended family, only sons and their progeny are inheritors and keepers and therefore the only ‘real’ and ‘active’ members of the next generation. The novel is seen by critics as exposing the disparity that exists in Indian society, between, “differently empowered or disempowered groups...including the violence that often maintains those relations” (Friedman 2001, 112). It is about the ways which individuals, particularly women find to resist the oppressive conditions imposed upon them by society.

*The God of Small Things* has been read through the many biographical overlaps that it has to its creator’s life, with Roy herself providing some cues:

I grew up in a little village in Kerala. It was a nightmare for me. All I wanted to do was to escape, to get out, to never have to marry somebody there. Of course, they were not dying to marry me. I was the worst thing a girl could be: thin, black, and clever (Interview Barsamian 2001).

That Mary Roy, her mother was responsible for fighting a legal battle in Kerala, to ensure the inheritance rights of Syrian Christian women, does provide an interesting backdrop to her own awareness of women’s issues and rights. Further as she says, her mother’s cynicism towards marriage did colour her own perspective on it:

I grew up in Ayemenem, the village in which *The God of Small Things* is set. Given the way things have turned out, it’s easy for me to say that I thank God that I had none of the conditioning that a normal, middle class Indian girl would have. I
had no father, no presence of this man telling us that he would look after us and beat us occasionally in exchange. I didn't have a caste, and I didn't have a class, and I had no religion, no traditional blinkers, no traditional lenses on my spectacles, which are very hard to shrug off. I sometimes think I was perhaps the only girl in India whose mother said, "Whatever you do, don't get married". For me, when I see a bride, it gives me a rash. I find them ghoulish, almost. I find it so frightening to see this totally decorated, bejeweled creature who, as I wrote in *The God of Small Things*, is "polishing firewood" (ibid).

Reviewers like *The Guardian*’s Madeline Bunting have overstated the seamlessness, seeing an iconic role playing in Roy’s personal life that is unproblematically connected with the novel. She also sees her as a thrilling new political-feminist icon, one who epitomizes the ‘new face’ and a ‘coming of age’ of feminism:

Her feminism is about articulating a voice and a sensibility which is authentically feminine and offers no deference to a largely male-determined status quo. Her feminism is about integrating the whole of her life: understanding the power relations which underpin her friendships as much as those which underpin the Indian state. She is not afraid of talking about traditional female virtues such as gentleness and love, nor reticent about enjoying traditional female pastimes such as gossiping with friends as she picks over glass beads and cheap, brightly colored cotton fabrics in the market... It is those pleasures, plus her wicked sense of humour, which have ensured that she escapes the Puritanism and judgmentalism which has dogged western feminism from bra burning to political correctness (2001).

Bunting’s alludes to a depoliticised and dehistoricised product that forms the backlash against feminism in the West, seen in subcultures like the “Girl Culture” that celebrate a vigorous reclamation and recuperation of the word ‘girl’. Movements like the ‘Riot Grrrls’, and ‘Girlies’ in the U.S. and E-zines like
“Riot Girls”, “Amazon City” and “W.I.N.”, foreground a celebration of the accoutrements of ‘femininity’ – make-up, fashion, all that had previously been censured by second wave feminists as inextricably caught up in patriarchal definitions of female identity. For the ‘Girlies’, femininity is no longer at odds with ‘feminism’, but at the very centre of an ideology of agency, confidence and resistance. Yet this can be problematic as it feeds into ways of further commodifying women through a positioning that remains attractive and also non-threatening to patriarchy. Also what is ambiguous is how a politics of subjectivity incorporates an understanding of agency within self-representation as well as its inadvertent appropriation.

Perhaps what Roy is more closely aligned to is a more political ‘avatar’ of feminism, seen in what is termed as ‘Third Wave’. Although as a political and critical stance it challenges the monolithic structure of an older feminism, it is in many ways enmeshed in and in continuation of negotiations and struggles that were present from the start:

An insistence on the continuation of feminist movement (I am the third wave) resists narrative scripts that imply that women’s movements are no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant. The very invocation of “third wave feminism” signals a rejection of scripts that assume that the gains forged by the second wave have so completely invaded all tiers of social existence that feminists themselves have become obsolete. When used in this context, “third wave” becomes a stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists, a sound bite to counter the now infamous refrain “I’m not a feminist, but...” (Siegel 1997, 52)

With no utopic vision of the perfectly egalitarian society or the fully realized individual, third wave feminists work with the fragmentation of existing identities and institutions. As a politics it fills the lacunae left by sections of
second-wave feminism, seen in the often unintended politics of exclusion within many strands within mainstream western feminism:

What really differentiates the third wave from the second is the tactical approach it offers to some of the impasses that developed within feminist theory in the 1980s... Third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition (Snyder 2008, 175-176).

Third-wavers possess an astute awareness and cultural consciousness of difference, reconceptualized thorough a postmodernist shift in sensibility. Its constituent component is exploratory rather than defining and thus more searching than conclusive. This might not stand as a permanent blueprint for an oppositional political consciousness and activism, but it does reveal a design through which women can chart the points through which differing ideologies can meet despite disjunctive trajectories:

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad. This way of ordering the world is especially difficult for a generation that has grown up transgender, bisexual, interracial, and knowing and loving people who are racist, sexist, and otherwise afflicted (Walker 2006).

This does make for a difficult reading, because almost every belief and perception is circumscribed by warnings of internal contradictions. However, the
premise behind this is useful as it points to one of the central tenets of feminism, that no experience speaks for another and therefore there can be no unproblematized universalization. The diversity of approaches and locations is aimed with multivocality as a trope. The postmodern view holds that instead of appealing to foundations for political claims, an appeal to context can be made. Within this is an important theory of feminist activism -the strategy of ‘differential consciousness’, developed by Chela Sandoval. She reads differential consciousness as an activist tactic that contrasts with the rigid classification evident in the dominant, hegemonic, feminism of white women. She explains its benefit through an analogy to standard transmission that allows one to shift gears, depending on the demands of a given situation:

The differential mode of social movement and consciousness depends on the practitioner’s ability to read the current situation of power and self consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples. Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power’s formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, and class justice, when their readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands” (2000, 77).

This is also closely aligned with Gayatri Spivak’s critical idea of ‘strategic essentialism’, that proposes a “strategic use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1987, 205). This accepts that essentialist and normative categories of human identity need to be critiqued, yet sometimes one cannot avoid using such categories to make sense of the social and political world. This also provides an understanding of Roy’s assertion that it is not always possible to
"fight a pristine...war" (Interview Kolhatkar 2004) as contextual demands could be predicated on contingent needs that might not always be permanently viable or useful.

Thus Roy's understanding of feminism and its commitments recognizes that as a politics it offers an inclusive theory of social justice and therefore any progressive movement that works at fighting oppression and discrimination of subjugated groups would have to also include a feminist component. It is this that informs her activist work in mixed gender struggles such as those within the global justice movement, even as she does have certain explicit affinities with organized feminist activist networks in India, like CAVOW. As both a critical practice and political stance in her work and writing feminism's pluralist and multivocal underpinning gives her the space to engage with causes and movements through different yet connected positions.

References-


