**My brush with feminism: in three acts**

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Feminism in India

When I look back into my life to understand how I became a feminist, I can clearly find three acts whereby I reckoned my own position; which invariably helped me establish, manoeuvre and strengthen my relationship with feminism.

I bloomed late into the feminist paradigm. This, I call the first act. In my 20s, discussing feminism with my British flatmates made me averse to their notions of equality and privilege, without acknowledging the structural inequities and subservience that was part of the culture where I grew up. Whenever my parents quarrelled, my father would not hesitate to remind my mother that it was his name on the door of our house in India, my mother could walk out if she was unhappy. The films I watched fed into this mysterious non-feminism stance that I held dear to my heart. Feminism - the bra-burning type - that my friends advocated for did not suit my purpose. Professionally, I worked for women's empowerment and looked at their needs, capacities and abilities to recover from repeated disaster events and yet I grappled with the ideas and debates that were shoved under my throat in the name of feminism. I now realise, being able to not label myself a feminist was also stemming from the privileged life I had led growing up in urban India.

Despite pursuing my doctoral studies understanding women's relationship with water after disasters, I used to refrain from positioning myself a feminist. Influenced by the work of Bangladeshi researcher, Farhana Sultana I clearly recall in my pre-viva preparation meeting with my doctoral supervisory team, I confessed I wish I was open about my stance as a feminist because I would have been so much more aware, observant and critical about how women's relationship with water was framed within patriarchal structures of dominance, safety and benevolence. Although I passed my *viva voce* without being questioned about this particular aspect of my research, it became a personal ambition to become more critical, reflexive and analytical about my research, practice and teaching.

When I came across this term, *intersectional feminism,* I came to realise why I had always hesitated to call myself a feminist: most of my understanding of what feminism stood for was mostly Western, white female centred arguments of occupying space and written from the perspective of the victor, understanding and acknowledging their role in subjugating the oppressed. Intersectional feminism, for me, was a mould that could hold space for those who were oppressed too. That offered me a respite - I could now investigate my personal, practical and field experiences with a new lens. I could begin to fathom how women across different spaces, tribes, castes in regions where I worked lived and were influenced, and sometimes used their agency to take actions to improve their lives despite living in the margins.

Second act: My relationship with feminism pivoted when I made the choice to become a mother. Coming across people's invasive comments, judgements and assumptions about the choices I made about my own body opened up a plethora of questions in my mind. First and foremost, I re-evaluated the books I read - including more diverse voices, and proactively choosing women and non-binary authors. I started exploring these critical questions through the lens of Asian-Indian feminist scholars and writers like [Krishna Sobti](https://feminisminindia.com/2021/03/05/book-review-gujarat-here-gujarat-there-krishna-sobti/), Amrita Pritam, Nivedita Menon, Leela Gandhi and Meena Kandasamy. Alongside my work also evolved - within the fulcrum of thought provided by feminist economists such as Bina Desai and Naila Kabeer I began to investigate how inter and intra-household relationships, agency and resources were distributed based on gender and how decisions around what and when women ate, grew in their fields, what nutritious foods they gave their children, what they wore during [menstruation](http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/i-rec/i-Rec2019/i-Rec-2019_program.pdf), when and with whom they could visit markets or health centres were all influenced by patriarchy. It was not just about whether, when and whom women chose to marry and have children. All along women are given a script to follow within this system and any non-conformity is looked down upon, ridiculed and ostracised.

In the third act, in my new role as a teacher and academic, my feminism was now performed within the confines of a neoliberal university's classroom. Drawing inspiration from bell hooks', "Teaching to transgress" and [teaching virtually during the pandemic](https://feminisminindia.com/2021/08/23/teaching-digitally-virtual-lectures-amidst-a-pandemic/), I began to associate learning within these online classrooms as an act of survival, of having each other's backs and leaning in when we needed support or just a safe space to express what we are feeling. This was not easy. It continues to be a crisis that is fuelled by the drivel of economic and financial ambitions of an extractive education system. As weeks rolled into months, and later years on virtual university, this act of being myself in classroom, sometimes vulnerable, most times open, reflective and welcoming of students' experiences, reflections and emotions became the fulcrum of my relationship with feminism. In doing so, we were collectively resisting the dominant and normative discourses on education. In this act, hopefully not the final act, I continue to challenge students' assumptions of class participation, leadership being open and critical at the same time and most importantly bringing their true selves, experiences and perceptions into the classroom, virtually for the time being. This is not only emotionally taxing, and erodes my ability to function as a productive professional on non-teaching days but it is also turning into an act of immense joy, creativity and engagement with young minds. Thus, classroom becomes a fertile ground where both the teacher and the student are actively learning and reflecting on how ideas learnt in classroom impact our experiences outside of it, thereby learning to integrate theory and practice: ways of knowing with ways of being.