

Does Feminist Historiography Have An Emancipatory Potential?

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Everyday acts of resilience of ordinary women do not necessarily aim to overthrow existing hierarchies and gendered oppressions. The article proposes a renewed understanding of resistance and in doing so, attempts to recover and recast notions of vulnerability and resilience as useful variables that we, in fact, inherit from existing feminist epistemological groundings. How does feminist scholarship engage with narratives that overlie vulnerabilities and contextual specificities, unable to be accommodated easily within the “sights” and “sites” of feminist resistance?

Feminist historiography largely concerns the way feminist scholars have recorded, reflected and conceptualised histories of feminism and the ways in which such conceptualisations have informed feminist theory and praxis. It is important to recognise that the term “feminism” carries multiple meanings and ideological positionalities within it, and hence, is not the object of a singular history. Feminist history writings have often occurred as a response to questions of power and privilege, capturing the contested terrain between history and history writing. In challenging traditional historiographical presuppositions, feminist historians have forwarded critiques of feminists’ uncritical use of the category of

“woman” as a unified object of theorising and a unified subject of knowing; widened the array of formerly neglected subjects and marginal practices to include unremarkable and mundane subjects; reworked historiography to ask questions about objectivity; questioned the role of the researcher in constructing knowledge and ushered new locations of research informed by standpoint epistemologies (Doucet and Mauthner 2006). Feminist historiography has thus interrogated the relations of exploitation, domination, censorship, and erasure and attempted to disrupt and transform traditional production of memory and knowledge. In this panoply of feminist reworkings, the notion of “resistance” has continued to engage feminist scholarship and imagination. This is rooted in the foundational understanding that recognising women’s acts of resistance offers more emancipatory possibilities for women’s struggles (Rajan 2000). Feminist historiography has engaged with ways in which women have performed resistance in response to oppressive structures of power to recover their lived experiences, struggles and their very subjectivity.

The focus of this essay, however, is not on the exceptional and extraordinary women who have consciously resisted or broken out of oppressive power structures, thereby radically transforming their conditions of existence. The intention is also not to rehearse unified struggles of women that offer meta-narratives of collective resistance. We want to focus on the everyday acts of resilience of ordinary women that may not aim at revolutionary overthrow of existing hierarchies and gendered oppression. They may not always be rooted in feminist ethos and may even work in confluence with power and patriarchy. Consequently, such individual and seemingly non-emancipatory actions are not often construed as feminist resistance. This essay attempts to foreground acts of resilience performed ordinarily by the vulnerable as proposing a renewed understanding of resistance and locations of its praxis. In so doing, we attempt to recover and recast notions of vulnerability and resilience as useful variables that are, in fact, inherited from existing feminist epistemological groundings.

Recasting Notions of Vulnerability and Resilience

Radha Kumar in her work, *The History of Doing*, records the ways in which ordinary women rework traditional practices to their advantage negotiating “concessions” from husbands, families, communities and so on that were otherwise not accessible to them (1993:146). Spiritual practices of the “possessed” women—simulated possession by the Devi—became tactics of accessing basic needs of food and nutrition particularly during pregnancies, ways of reforming alcoholic husbands by instilling awe and fear of retribution, brokering more money from the husband for domestic expenses and therefore more power within the sphere of the household. Veena Talwar Oldenburg’s (1990) expositions of the lifestyle of courtesans of Lucknow as resistance unpack how covert strategies of rehearsed stereotypical expressions of femininity and unabashed materialism were, in fact, guided by motives of self-preservation and self-interest rather than any explicit resistance to patriarchal power structures. And yet, they managed to threaten received and prevalent ideas of marriage,

honour, and heteronormativity. Oldenburg invokes James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) to underscore the "misleading, sterile, and sociologically naive insistence upon distinguishing 'self-indulgent,' individual acts, on the one hand, from presumably, 'principled,' selfless collective actions, on the other, and excluding the former from the category of real resistance" (1990: 281). Stephanie Camp's study *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004) opens up the multiple dimensions that acts of resistance might conjure, lest they be perceived as "little more than fits of temper." Enslaved women's bodies and homes, for Camp, were inevitably political arenas due to the very covert nature of resistance performed in these personal spaces, negotiating livelihood and cultural assertions with structural inequality, subservience and vulnerability brought about by slavery.

By bringing the individual, everyday assertions that do not claim or aspire to produce any radical transformation in the social surroundings within the realm of resistance, these studies open up critical possibilities of feminist historiography. Not only do the studies reorient our "sight" away from the remarkable and the dominant subject of traditional historiography towards the unstable and marginal subject positionalities, but they also mark these "sites" as locations of alternative history writing. Emerging from diverse sites and temporalities, they foreground acts that are not generally associated with deliberate action, subjectivity and agency. Experiences of oppression and vulnerability are examined as grounds of resistance, destabilising previously received notions of resistance itself.

Vulnerability and resilience are often seen as opposed to each other where the former is seen as passive and lacking agency. To be vulnerable is to be susceptible, exposed, and risky. Resilience, on the other hand, is understood as inherently positive and desirable, often also glorified as courageous acts of inevitability. We propose that the untying of experiences and positions of vulnerability from inactivity, passivity, and victimhood recognises the potential of "resilience" embedded in everyday acts of survival. The effort must be to conceptualise vulnerability as "the ability to affect and be affected" (Ravera et al 2016). Disentangling resilience from its association with deliberate action allows it to be recast as partial and contextually positioned acts of being, not necessarily antagonistic towards power. Experiences of vulnerability and acts of resilience that might ensue are, therefore, productive to the reconceptualisation of notions of resistance.

Revisiting Resistance

A crucial and compelling location of vulnerability in contemporary political discourse is the plight of farmers in India. It is not an altogether new situation and has been a pervasive and persistent feature in independent India. However, the precarious position of women within the agrarian sector, both as farmers' widows and as farmers themselves, has been paid little

or no attention to in scholarship within the field. Topical debates around the agricultural crisis articulated within the rights-based agitations of the recent past, prefigure women in agriculture, at worst, as invisible or, at best, shrouded within narratives of victimhood. They are either assimilated within the frameworks of mass-based movements or seen reductively as recipients of welfare/ assistance programmes of the state. The past few years have witnessed a record number of farmer suicides owing to increased costs of production and reduced farm prices, decline in farm credit, government apathy towards the farming community, gaps between sectoral policies and their implementation and the tumultuous changes in agroclimatic conditions. P Sainath (2014) reports that 2,96,438 farmers committed suicide in India in the 20 years between 1995 and 2014. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) (2015:235), 8007 farmers committed suicide across the country in the year 2015 alone. These conditions coupled with large-scale migration of male workers from rural to urban centres throw up challenges of increasing feminisation of the agrarian workforce. Oxfam India records that agricultural sector employs 80% of all economically active women in India and while nearly three-quarters of rural women depend on land for livelihood, only about 13% own land themselves (Oxfam 2018). There is by now sufficient evidence of the vulnerability of women and women-headed households after the death of their farmer-husbands (TFWFR 2017; NCW, MAKAAAM and UN Women 2017; Sontakke 2015; Sainath 2007). The unending cycle of indebtedness leads many to give up land and work as indentured labour, often exposing children and other dependents to precarious conditions of poverty, malnutrition, and no access to healthcare or education.

However, perceiving this crisis as only economic and delinking it from its social, familial, and psychological impacts invisibilises actions that women perform in their daily lives, carrying on despite odds, in unfavourable conditions of existence, thereby resisting oppressive social and cultural structures. Everyday challenges of bringing food to the table, sending children to school, resisting violence and isolation within families and communities often do not get accounted for within existing understandings of resistance. Studies on the gendered impacts of the agrarian crisis offer ample narratives of women living and surviving the social and economic havocs borne by the sector: ill-treatment by in-laws, losing land rights and rights of their children over the deceased husband's property, being caught in vicious cycles of indebtedness, suffering the breakdown of social support systems in the face of poverty and marginalisation, dealing with social stigma and trauma associated with widowhood while having to shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities towards children, the sick and the elderly (Jadhav 2017; Patnaik et al 2017; Wagh 2016; Kak 2013). Amidst such precariousness, there exist added pressures of aligning with movements asserting citizenship rights in order to secure compensation and redressal through formal institutional mechanisms. How does feminist scholarship engage with these narratives that overlie vulnerabilities and contextual specificities, unable to be accommodated easily within the "sights" and "sites" of feminist resistance? Proposing vulnerability as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance, Butler et al (2016:1) ask, "What follows when we conceive of resistance as drawing from vulnerability, as a resource of vulnerability, or as

part of the very meaning or action of resistance itself?"

In Lieu of a Conclusion

To be able to reimagine the idea of resistance, feminist historiography must pose a critique of this deliberate delinking of the economic from the everyday socio-psychological struggles of women. The question that we must ask is where do we locate resistance in the unfolding challenges in the agrarian sector today? Is it only in protest marches, rallies, and demonstrations on our city roads? What are the blind spots of viewing such crises as merely economic and locating a critical response to them in collective articulations of mass-based political mobilisations? How do we account for the performances of survival by women within households, communities, and farmlands through repetitive and resilient acts of daily existence? Following from Foucault, wherever there is power, there is also resistance. Power, for him, is to be located in micro-relations and in the normal everyday practices (Foucault 1980:39). The conceptualisation of power as functioning like a capillary—in a manner that stretches into the smallest and most private aspects of our lives, reaching into individuals so deep that it comes to define them—brings power into complex relations with subjects and by extension also to acts of negotiating power. Resistance, therefore, is also to be located much like power, in microsites, at the level of the individual and her every day.

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