

**Feminism: Concepts and Theories**  
**Dr. Mathangi Krishnamurthy**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Feminism: Concept and theories**  
**Summary: Weeks 1-4**

Welcome to feminism concept and theories lecture 26. This is one among next few presentations that will take you over the salient points you need to cover as you go over all the material that we have done weeks 1 to 12 in order to prepare for the exam.

In this presentation, I am going to cover the salient points from weeks 1 to 4. As I have mentioned earlier, these are by far some of the most important concepts that you would have been introduced to in this series of lectures, so please make sure to pay careful attention and to go over the material rigorously.

We began the course by stating that we will evaluate the rise and trajectory of the feminist movement as well as explicate concepts surrounding feminism itself both as a set of theories and as a set of movements, ways in which such feminism has developed, how is it that it deals with gender, what is its mandate and what are the ways in which it is important in the contemporary time.

We also wanted to open it out into questions of theory proper through case studies, literature and ethnography in order to answer to question as to why it is critical to our everyday lives. Now, I am just going over all of these again just to make sure that we are covering everything sufficiently as we go from weeks 1 to weeks 11.

Central to the series of lectures was off course an early understanding of the sex/gender system. Please rehearse the definition again, a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into gendered beings whose activities and roles are expected to correlate with biology, in other words, sex is considered to be biological, gender is considered to be cultural. Later on, we will off course look at interrogations and critiques of this very systems but this is where we began.

We also asked broad questions as to what feminism might be and suggested that a) it is a system of ideas that examines the roots and reasons for women subordination in relation to male or masculine privilege. We of course reiterated that it's not anti-men, but it is in tension

again not with men but with male-centered ideas in this cause. It is an ideology, it is a system of ideas, it is a set of beliefs a manner of thinking characteristic to a group of people who identified with feminism.

Now, from this you might have an idea that again feminism is anti-men and I hate to make this point again and again but it's a kind of ideology that is against that behaviour that men but also women feel compelled to exhibit in their understanding of women's position in the world. Therefore, is it a movement for socio-political change based on said ideology. It posits gender of cause as the primary category of analysis.

From then we went on to study feminist politics according to bell hooks and spoke about it unrelations to consciousness raising if you remember, speaking about how groups of women got together to shared] their experiences in order to try and understand how patriarchy was constructed in the world and how it filtered down to day-to-day experiences. We spoke about the differences between revolutionary and reformist feminists and bell hooks speaks about the role of white supremacy in relation to gender.

We also looked at hooks' critique of lifestyle feminism and emphasized that it cannot be just a set of choices that everybody is free to make, it must engage with systemic change.

We also discussed how feminism itself consists of a number of feminisms to be specific and that it does not necessarily mean only one single point of view. It is often characterised by internal struggles based on differences race, caste and class. It is also rife with differences on the modes of struggle and we saw this already in the differences between reformist and revolutionary feminism. So, it mimics the differences of internal struggles of many of the such movements. To this extent, it is a range of movements rather than a singular homogenous point of view and mode of action.

In the first few series of lectures, we also then went on to ask the very important question as to why is it that we even want to engage with theory? We spoke a little bit about the function of concepts and categories and organising meaning in the world. Say for example, sex being biological, gender being cultural and how such conceptualisations are historically specific and located and must there for be considered in specific relation to time and space as much as to conceptual understanding.

Here, we introduced you to the question of the dualism which is so fundamental to everything that we have done since "an intense established and developed cultural expression of such a

hierarchical relationship, so as to make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable.” I would encourage you to go over this again and again until you have this down pretty much by rote, because it truly is very important to the ways in which we understand language, meaning etc.

We spoke about examples of such dualisms, culture/nature, reason/nature, subject/object etc. And we then came down to the important deconstructive question, how is truth produced? How does language frame meaning? Why is it that something appears truthful and what are the conditions of such truth making?

From here we moved on to our first concept equality, and in this we focused on the first question which is then we say feminism or feminist theory deals with a demand for equality what do we mean by that – equal to what? In other words, we started with questioning what the very idea of equality is predicated upon. We asked about equality in two different spaces, public and private, between home and the world, and we attempted to explore various models of equality.

We also looked at models of equality in relation to two different enunciations, difference and sameness. In other words, how do you look at equality between different sets of people versus what is the equality when it is sort of equal to sort of what men already have; it is something the problem with that kind of formulation.

You will recall this model, which dealt with barest conceptual schemers of difference are second concept which is what are we looking at when we predicate equality upon forms of difference? Experiential diversity, positional meanings, sexual difference, differences between women and men, differences produced through discourse or language so on and so forth. So, the reason I pulled this up in your recap presentation is for you to go back and revisit it and try and understand what conceptual scheme as are. We have already gone over these and I'd like you to pay careful attention to this form of organising concepts.

While looking at these questions of equality and difference we also explored side by side the question of postmodernism and poststructuralism and the ways in which they are different than each other and clarifications were issued as to postmodernism being a position whereas post structuralism offering and set of tools or being a methodology to examine in the case of feminism concepts and theories as to how women's lives are constructed in the form they take.

If women's lives exhibit a particular kind of pattern, the pattern conforming to certain seemingly truthful understandings about gender and women in the world, how is it that we can deconstruct these patterns to arrive at the historically located nature of such truth?

After equality and difference, we took up the question of choice and located choice very much in particular context which I will come to in just a second, but very importantly we asked about choice in relation to individual identity. Is there a separate self in the first place? What is the location of the separate self and are all forms of identity then predicated upon an individual's capacity to choose those aspects of identity? is choice unlimited?

In relation to the context individual choice, we located it in late modernity and looked to theorist Anthony Giddens' to be able to explicate this. We spoke about how choice becomes paramount specially in late modernity characterised as it is by a large amount of doubt. There are a greater array of things to choose from given hastened production and supply chains and therefore in such a consumerism inundated world, there is also a parallel disappearance of sign posts or guideline on how to choose. Therefore, choice becomes a new mechanism of self-identity.

We also spoke about choice as particularly important to one kind of feminism namely liberal feminism, which understands equality as something that can be achieved as long as women have the right to choose as much as men or anybody else in society and liberal feminism is very much located in the question of agency. How is it that individuals have agency in society?

Here, we spoke about what happened when say terms like career choice are replaced by terms like occupational fate and how in liberal feminism, career choice seems like such an innocent term which is as long as women choose a career, they will be fine, ignoring the fact that all sorts of structural constraints play upon women's capacity to choose in an unbridled fashion.

We looked at this question of occupational behaviour as seen within liberal feminism and underline the assumption that all people has to do is choose a particular job or career, this simplifies the issue one and two it implies some sort of deficiency on the part of those who do not choose or restrict their selection as if something were to be wrong with them and critiqued the terminology and framework of choice in liberal feminism, therefore as inappropriate.

At the end of this chapter, we focused on the poststructuralist as choosing subject as a figure that we might want to pay careful attention to. Let me just go over this once more just so we are clear and this is an important concept. Poststructuralist conceptions of the subject have appealed to men because they seem to offer a way to an apparent tension in notions of social construction. Therefore, trying to find a middle point between an overly deterministic social structure and an overly agentive individual.

The poststructuralist choosing subject if a kind of figure that can be constituted by analysing desire. Here, we admit that not all subject positions are equally available and individuals have differential access to particular discursive positions, while at the same time also allowing that within that gambit discursive positions, individual make a wide variety of choices even as desires in those cases are constituted to discourses through which one is subject of and subject to. One is created through desires available in society but one also forms desires that then create society.

After choice, we explore another very important concept namely care and asked as to what is it that constitutes care? Is it even a theoretical term or should we merely be happy thinking of it in empirical terms or rather not to create some kind of hierarchy between theory and empiricism but to ask what are the ways in which care can be conceived? How do we theorise forms of care therefore, and the relationship between them?

One of the ways in which we sought to do this was by speaking about who is it that cares? Who is it that's cared for? Is it private? Is it public? And how is it accordingly given value in society? So, here is a table that you might recognise from our lecture, we were speaking about how, when volunteer builders build houses for the homeless? The value is high. However, cleaners cleaning the toilets in a care home are accorded low value. Think also of this in particularly gendered terms that when the wife offers care to a husband who is sick, the value is low but when the husband offers care to the wife who is sick, the value is high.

And at the end of this chapter if you remember, we debated a morality of care versus a morality of justice framework and a feminine ethic of care versus a feminist ethic of care and asked about what is it that we should aim for in an ideal feminist society?

And I am comparing what a morality of care framework looks like vis a morality of justice framework, we also named the moral dilemma that each seeks to address and perhaps came to the conclusion that a morality of justice is very much predicated upon the sanctity of the

individual whereas a morality of care and responsibility is predicated upon relationships and relationality.

From care we moved on to a seemingly opaque concept which is time and asked why is time a concept that is gendered? What kind of time are we even talking about?

And here, we paused to examine how is it that time itself finds place in feminist thought, think therefore a first, second and third wave where one follows the other, but at the same time, we also asked as to how time appears for women as opposed to men given the proliferation of common sensical terms like men cannot multitask or women can multitask, how is it that time make different demands of male and female figures?

From time, we led on to experience and spoke about the emergence of the feminist motto, the personalist, the political and asked why is it important to work from the standpoint of women's experiences and the ways in which it is central to the feminist movement.

We spend some time here on standpoint theory. Nancy Hartsock standpoint theory and spoke about its 5 aspects. We also paid attention to the ways in which standpoint theory fundamentally assumes that women's experiences of being outside the dominant order give them a privilege knowledge of social reality. And how such privilege can be taken into account to form a very, very specific standpoint.

We also played devil's advocate here a little bit to say that, well just empiricism does not help standpoint theory; it's not enough to gather women's experiences, it not in an agglomeration that works for us, instead knowledge emerges through the struggles that the oppresses wage against their oppressors, meaning just having experiences at the margins of society are not sufficient to be able to form standpoint theory. Instead it must be accompanied by struggle.

Here, we also spoke about how to look at feminist standpoint theory in relation to a strong objectivity as a hallmark of feminist research. To take up the position of strong objectivity Harding remarks one values the other's perspective but one does not go native or merge oneself with the researched rather one seeks to consider the particularity of cultural location from a critical distance.

If you remember we also read a little bit of Haraway who says, "A standpoint is not an empiricist appeal to or by the oppressed but a cognitive, psychological, and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by the non-essentialist historically contingent situated standards of strong objectivity. It is an necessary fruit of the practise of oppositional and

differential consciousness". This is what we locate as a form of struggle, which is that you have to constantly practice a differential consciousness that is created by virtue of being on the outside.

At the end of this chapter, we looked at the possibility of a feminist epistemology, where we said that given how the nature of women's experiences as individuals and as social beings has been excluded and almost represented, going forward we need to include these contributions in order to be able to experience a shift in perspective; and therefore, we argued for attempts to reclaim not just the value of women's experiences but the value in women's own terms.

You will also recall here a brief discussion on the figure of the cyborg which is Donna Haraway's contribution. The cyborg according to Haraway is new politically motivated imaginative device and an alternative story about women's experiences which takes into account fractured identities in and the pluralities of multiple feminisms. So, in other words, if standpoint theory said that women being outside of the patriarchal order have a privileged kind of vantage point over reality, we also acknowledged that women themselves are not a singular force in the world, there are many fragmentations within the category we call women and therefore Haraway suggested as a kind of theoretical experiment that how about we look at a completely new figure, even more marginalised perhaps but also an agglomeration of various kinds of subject positions and therefore an imaginative device that can provide for us an alternative story about women's experiences and we concluded the chapter with this set of discussions. And our last set of concepts dealt with the question of place and space and how to map these onto gendered identities.

Very specific to our discussion was, a fairly easy division between public and private but also, we mapped on other things on to these sets of questions where men are considered to be located in places of work, women are considered to be located in places of domestic calm and feminist approaches to the gendered division of space take into account how time, travel, progress are all associated with masculinity whereas space, place or locatedness or location and geography are all considered to be associated with femininity and then we went on to ask what this means for feminist theory?

We explored a few different writings in relation to the concept of home to also show how even the concept of home in feminist theory can have multiple meanings depending on who is speaking and from what place of speech. So, if all space is imbued with the idea of home for some people, where its a place of calm repose, comfort, private reprieve from worldly

troubles, for others, home is also the site of social relations structure by power and inequality. For example, surveillance, captivity, abuse, and entrapment.

We explored these across a writings of three authors Minnie Bruce Pratt, bell hooks and Sharon Marcus bringing us to the end of four weeks of discussion on where is building blocks of feminist vocabulary which we wen continued to use for the weeks after that. I will end the presentation with this. This is just a broad summary of the terms that you need to go back and revisit in your preparation for the exam.