

Feminism and the Question of Man: Negotiating the (Im)Possible

Anirban Das

(forthcoming in *Men and Feminism in India*, eds., Romit Chowdhury and Zaid Al Baset,  
Routledge)

*Introduction*

Can men do feminisms? The question, obviously, is not articulated well. In certain senses, men are seen to do feminisms empirically, rendering invalid the problem at a commonsensical level. A better way of asking is, in what sense can men do feminisms. The problem here is posed evidently at a structural level. Even if real men are seen to do feminism of a certain sort, the question does not limit itself to the complicated stories of that endeavour. The raising of the problem at a more abstract level is assumed to be legitimate. It becomes necessary, then, to begin by thinking what makes this task (of doing feminism) difficult for men at that register. One needs to address the question of experience lived through struggles in gender politics without reducing the politics to the experience. The debates around the standpoint epistemologies become important at this juncture.

In a well known enunciation of the predicament of feminist epistemologies, Elisabeth Grosz (2002) had spoken of the tensions implicit in the dual imperative of “being feminist” and “being theory”. The explicit political ‘bias’ of the former has a fraught relationship with the ‘neutral’ universality of the latter. Is it possible to be biased and neutral at the same moment? One well-known response, whose genealogy can easily be traced to Marxian scholarship, is to assert that the only possible neutral gesture in a world biased for the dominant is to be biased – for the subjugated – against this bias. This imaginary rejoinder keeps unanswered the question of the need for the neutral. Is this need still there? Is the bias that is aimed at in the service of neutrality? Who can decide if this is so? How can one take this decision?

Any ‘modern’ form of knowledge has to negotiate between the universal aspiration of its substantive claims and the very situated particularities which define the boundaries of these claims. As in any other modern form of knowledge, the universal aspirations of feminist theory cannot remain blind to the particular enunciations which tend to fragment those objectives. Feminist epistemologies respond to these problems in multiple ways. In many of

the contemporary discussions, the operative term through which this question has been addressed is ‘contingency’. The necessity of remembering the contingent character of social identity has been underlined. Social theory, in trying to address the contingency of the ‘social’, has to work beyond the known boundaries of sociological and philosophical knowledge: this has been the implicit claim in the argument.

In this paper, I try to complicate the situation. What is it to think and work with the contingency of the social? To think of contingency, does one have to forego the universal? If not, and that again has been implicit in a nuanced form of argument, how does one account for that logically. One response has been to talk of the workability of knowledge, of context-sensitive theories of action. One cannot work with, cannot think, solely in terms of the contingent, the proposition runs. But that remains a pragmatic defense, not a logical response, I argue. I deal with attempts to address the problem of the contingency of workable yet generalizable knowledge. These are important because these address the problem at the epistemic level, not because they provide ready solutions. In the question of men doing feminisms, one cannot just point at the contextual making of the identities ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Nor can one just assert that it is necessary to address the mechanisms of formation of these two identities in their general register as well as, simultaneously, remember the socially contingent forms which they take. The logical flow of one register to the other, which makes it necessary to address both at the same time, has to be established. For social theories, the import of my attempt is again in the need to address the impasse at the epistemic register. Not that this addressal is enough to solve the problem. Epistemic solution is not the bottom-line. As a point of fact, my own argument will try to bring in the co-implications of ontology with ethics and the questions around being and doing. The epistemic dimension is a necessary and not a sufficient condition of looking at the problem. This fact is something one often tends to forget in the rush to find easy pragmatic solutions. In what ways do the ontology of ‘man’ negotiate the politics of feminism, is the question I thus try to address.

### *The Problem*

It was seventeen years from now, in 1999, when I wrote an essay that was published as “In Search of a Feminist Theory for Men: The (Im)Possibility of (Wo)Man” in a small journal called *margins* (till then, later called *from the margins*). I had just begun my journey into the humanities, doing my MA a little late in life, and, with the support of a small group of caring,

indulgent and intensely critical friends, was busy bringing out the journal. A few even more indulgent senior people in the academia contributed to the journal, talked about it, criticized and took it seriously. But that is a different story. I followed this up with another essay in the following year “In Search of the Feminist Woman: The (Im)Possibility of *Being*” (2000). As Mary John pointed acutely out in her response to these essays, working through the thickets of conceptual debates around feminism in closely woven arguments, I could barely reach the question of *men*. Her query was, resonating somewhat with one of Stephen Heath’s concerns in the essay (Heath 1987) canonical by now, “I cannot help wondering why it is that when men ... want to speak as “other”, it takes the form of claiming/impersonating the “feminine” rather than evolving a feminist politics for men” (John 2002, 247). For John, and more so for Indira Chowdhury (2000) who had earlier responded to the first essay, the problem lay in an overt taking of positions for abstract theoretical enunciations of the question as against a historically grounded context-sensitive dealing of the issue. We barely realized, at that moment, the generosity of this gesture from two leading feminists of our time in responding to almost unknown academic nobodies with all seriousness and energy. In hindsight, one does realize the limitations of ones articulations, the difficult formations of the essays that did not allow the question of man to appear except in a perfunctory manner. These were peculiar essays, declaring to search for a feminist politics for men and ending in discussing the difficulties of basing feminist politics on the identity of the woman. Do I, thereby, now think those two essays to be flawed in a fundamental way? The answer, as expected, will be complicated.

On second thoughts, trying to think of whether feminisms could be premised on the identity called ‘woman’ and in what does that identity then consist, is not a problem much distant from the question of men in feminism. The unthinking, or even certain nuanced versions of this, connection of the identity to the politics is premised on an authentication by the unmediated experiences of women, I suggested. And I tried to relate this to a dominant trend in feminist scholarship that repeats this forgetting of mediations in its celebration of historicization, even when the notion of history employed was discerning enough. For this trend, history becomes the only natural ground of mediation. To treat any category as a given ground of mediation is to treat that category as immediate and thus beyond interference. Doing thus is to forget that translations across immanent historicities let concepts work in abstract registers and these abstract transhistorical entities form equally legitimate grounds of mediation.

However, what I was trying to do then, in not very competent ways may be, and what I still think to be necessary, is, to maintain that for making a sense of men doing feminisms, one needs address the question of what is feminism in the sense of questioning the identity on which feminism is based. It is not enough to question feminisms' ties to the identities of women and state both men and women can do feminism, or men can do feminism with more difficulty, or whether a man or a woman becomes a feminist depends on innumerable contextual factors. The direction of my inquiry was into questioning the surety of these identities between which feminism seemed to oscillate. Again, I tried to hold on to a tentativeness even in this questioning. Isn't it too easy and ready a solution to assert a multiplicity of sexual moments that get ideologically congealed to two binary ends of the man and the woman? Isn't there a need to hold on to the identity of the woman even when, may be because, one is deconstructing its secure grounds? Speaking the language of the two, isn't it a little too simple to assert the dynamic of the many? Can one really get rid of the two just by an epistemic realisation? Into the myriad contexts through which a man may or may not become feminist, is it then, necessary to bring in the law of the inexorable two that continue to work across history, though only through history? May be, my essays failed to articulate these in clear terms. Yet they tenaciously held onto the predicament, refusing to come up with unambiguous solutions.

Here one may come up with a second point: the necessity of a production, through the text, of the difficulty of the situation. It is not simply a matter of a clear exposition of clear and present issues. Where the situation is complicated, for me, it is better to present that complication (albeit in as clear terms as possible) rather than make it lucidly available to the reader as a simplified terrain. Well, this is a tired debate. The only point I want to stress upon is that it is still a debate, people are liable to take different, often opposing positions on this, and it would be stupidly arrogant to take for granted any one of the ends. It is as naive to pretend that one can avoid the rigors of clear analysis by invoking complexities of the object of knowledge or of the processes of knowledge, as it is to blithely assume that depth lies in simplicity and clarity. Empirical instances abound on both the sides. My point is, despite the brilliance and clarity of Heath's essay, there are other, more convoluted (and no less serious or obfuscatory on that count) ways to articulate the difficulty, bordering on the impossibility, of men doing feminisms. The search for the meaning of feminism remains, is to remain, with the move to the impossible ends of these endeavours. The acts get defeated by their own selves if they are not marked indelibly by this inquiry.

So, how can men get inserted into the question of feminism and women?

*Feminist politics and the question of 'woman'*

Who is the subject of feminism? Is the politics of feminism coupled to the identity of the 'woman? The answer is not as easy as it seems. An easy disjuncture between the identity (woman) and the politics (feminism) would avoid the difficult problem of whether the identity has a privileged access to the politics. It is not a simple binary between opposing wholes (yes/no). If men can do feminism, do they have to work a little more? Does this 'more' depend on empirical situations of individuals? What are the structural elements that allow or hinder men to or from doing feminisms?

The construction of the identity of woman need not be intentional. Intention may or may not be a component of identity. The politics of feminism either presupposes an intention or a work (intentional or not) in changing the structure of phallogocentrism. When one thinks of (proto-feminist) women working before the birth of the category feminism, one is thinking along the latter meaning. I present a few telegraphic points on some elementary issues on thinking about the question of feminism and men.

1. Feminist thought and gender theory are two different and intersecting sets.
2. If conceived within the binary axis of ethico-politics and epistemo-ontology, feminist thought focuses on the former while gender theory has its focus on the latter. Though none of these wholly precludes any of the two dimensions.
3. Ethico-politics and epistemo-ontology are dimensions of *structurality* that involves *thinking*. The binary opposite to this is the *immanence* of *being*.

3.i. When 'history' is spoken of in critical theory, the two senses of *structurality* and *immanence* remain intertwined in it.

3.ii. When 'history' is posited against 'History', the latter is thought to be effacing *immanence* with *structure*.

4. One stream of the critiques of abstract reason and knowing (science- critiques, feminists, postcolonial theorists, more or less known under the blanket term of postmodernism) tries to problematize both the binaries of ethico-politics/ epistemology and immanence/ structure. As such, this stream views the knowledge of a concept to be inalienable from ethico-political considerations in the context of knowing the concept as well as from the immanence of the referent to that concept.
  - 4.i. In the phrasing of the above sentence, the dichotomy of concept/referent was alluded to. This allusion points at the impossibility of uttering anything wholly beyond the play of binaries.
  - 4.ii. The said stream of theorizing tries to write this impossibility into its enunciations.
5. Writing about 'man' involves writing in three different yet overdetermined registers simultaneously – a) the definition of 'man' in the structure of gendering: its epistemology; b) the implications of this definition for the 'woman', for the 'man', and the way 'man' is to be viewed at by feminism, the three together constituting its ethico-politics; c) the multiple elements that go on to constitute the immanent processes of being a man in a specific situation/location.
6. Treating the three registers to be overdetermined implies the impossibility of writing about the gendering of man in an abstract universality without referring to the location of its enunciation at a specific site and political space. Simultaneously, this implies the impossibility of writing about man in a specific context without referring to the universal structures of gendering with all their complexities. The complexities include the problem of working through the two-ness and the multiplicity of sexualities and sexes. Other identity categories like class, caste, race, nation, etc. are also implicated in the processes. The reference to these will depend on the focus of the inquiry in question.

The standpoint theories form a very important strand of feminist epistemology that tries to make sense of the question of the subject of feminism. That the answers from within the standpoint theories are not very simple is evident from the discussion on the distinction between the feminist standpoint and the woman's standpoint. In the former, the political positioning of the observer / knower is focused upon. In the latter, the ontology of the woman

is the more important element. The question becomes, how can one define the role of the man as a participant in feminism when feminism is defined in terms of the feminist or the woman's standpoint. The problem becomes more complicated if feminism and the category of 'woman' are seen to be in a relationship which is necessary yet tangential (not a one to one relation).

The complexity of the situation increases when one thinks of the links between the structural features of feminism or 'woman' with the immanent becomings of phenomenal women (working for the moment with a phenomenal / imaginary binary). The standpoint of the oppressed gets its ultimate definition through the experience (be that of being, of becoming, or of struggle) of the oppressed. Experience, when viewed to be accessible without mediation, repeats the mediation of the hegemonic. Experience, when viewed as being mediated through language or history, becomes amenable to authentications from linguistic or historical grounds. One may subscribe to an attempt to come out of the duality of the question – is experience an *immediate* presence or is it *mediated* by discourses and histories. An answer that gravitates to a focus on mediations is open to the charges of an easy solution of unexamined culturalism. This position shifts its attention to the cultural construction of experience, builds systemic structures based on the elements under scrutiny at the moment of the particular theoretical enunciation, and rests assured about the inevitable exclusions perpetrated on other elements (not deemed 'relevant' to the particular discussion in question), complacent with the inevitability of choosing a moment to start. On the other hand, the element of the unanticipatable remains untheorized, not taken cognizance of within the blanket term of immediacy.

In the canonical book on *Men in Feminism* ((Jardine and Smith 1987), the text published under the proper name Jacques Derrida is an authorized transcript of an interview with Derrida ("Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida"). The prefatory footnote to this article says –

"... it gives a good sense of how Derrida negotiates the difficult question which feminists inevitably will have about the treatment of "the feminine" in his work. It is perhaps worth remarking that in the original (i.e., unedited) transcripts Derrida often makes comments in the first person about his own relation to such questions. Those comments would have considerably affected the tone of the seminar, but we are not "authorized" to publish them."  
(189)

I bring this footnote into the main body of my discussion as a marker of a certain caution, if not unease, that the ‘man’ has to practice or to observe in his negotiations with feminism. The ‘special’ part he has to partake of in being feminist. My own experience of more than a decade in feminist academia is on the whole of a generous acceptance. The skepticism and covert hostility have come predominantly from male colleagues, most often in the form of suave personal half-articulated remarks. The content of these comments hinted at purported privileges of doing ‘marketable’ scholarship where feminism ‘sells’ more than their own ‘pure’ historical research or ‘real’ philosophy. That one can argue, theoretically, that ‘philosophy’ or ‘history’ or ‘sociology’ worth its name has to be feminist in an internal and intrinsic sense, is beyond the imaginations of the producers of these ‘high’ scholarship. Feminisms, rather ‘women’s issues’ for them, are add-on garnishing to the real thing.

On the part of ‘women’s studies’, one can now tentatively raise the issue of a cautious and hardly articulated move of treating the ‘man’ in feminism as an exotic exception, even in the gesture of acceptance. It is understandable that the man must be ready to accept a certain atmosphere of mild doubt across the divisions of experience and struggle, across an onto-ontological divide that separates the sexes. The question that remains is whether this hint of an incommensurability is also a hardening of that separation. Derrida’s text grapples with this problem, tries to unwind it through an act of division between sexual opposition and sexual difference and ends with a gesture towards the impossibility of such separation and the necessity of doing it. For him, “[o]pposition is two, opposition is man/woman. Difference on the other hand, can be infinite number of sexes.” (198) Women’s Studies, to be not reducible to the beehive, have to address if not come out of this problem. The unanticipatability that haunts the fixity of the power-laden field of sexual identities has to be attended to even when working within that very field.

But do all these seemingly vague and abstract ruminations on the contingency or stability of the subject have any bearing on the problem at hand? On the question of, how, in a structural sense, can men do feminisms? From our discussions so far, I will again, in the form of a discrete line of unadorned arguments, present my position. Before that, one self defence. Is it at all necessary to pose this question at the level of logic? Is it not perfectly superfluous to the discussions of men doing feminisms and their very real predicament accessible through concrete studies in history or ethnography? My point is, without this query into the (im)possibility of feminisms for men, the question of feminism and the question of men both remain at a commonsensical level leaving the problem of their connection as a problem of



simple addition. To some men, feminism can be added as an additional attribute depending on the specific contexts of their work. For some moments in feminism, men can be added as compatriots, friends or allies. What makes this addition possible is the question I raise.

The definition of 'man' retains a supplementary excess that lets it work against itself. Two points are to be noted. One, this excess does not flow from the empirical differences in men's positions. Though these differences are operative in case of empirical men doing feminisms. The fundamental instability in identities is what lets de-sexing (in the sense of a 'declassing') at the level of logical possibility. Two, the supplement does not guarantee transgressions. It keeps open the possibilities of transgression. Overdeterminations of contexts and intentions let the possibilities move in unanticipatable ways to myriad directions. The definition of feminism also exceeds woman. This excess is not reducible to, though constituted largely by, the processes named as gendering. These processes, that produce the meanings of the man and the woman out of innumerable profusion of possibilities, are overdetermined and inexorably marked by the logic of twoness. Supplements to the meanings thus produced, potentially dangerous, lend feminisms the possibilities to incorporate the supplements to the name of man. There still remains the differential between the two names, man and woman, to their accesses to the politics of feminism.

If men do feminisms, they do not do the same feminisms as women. The difference is not in the order of an opposition. It is in the scale of a slippage, a discernible yet simmering distinction.

### *Of Men and Women: Memories*

If men may access feminisms of a certain kind, the way in would likely be marked by guilt if not reparation. One's position in a field structured hierarchically as a pre-given 'fact' lets him enjoy privileges and power over the 'women' even if he does not actively pursue the position. The guilt that one thus gets inscribed by is structural and not dependent upon his intentions or actions. Even active refusal to access one's privileges leaves residual effects of the hierarchy that marks one as the dominant. A not so thin line of demarcation separates the powerful who declines his benefits and the abject who does not have access to those.

Thus the guilt of the 'man' may also be of many shades. At one end of the spectrum is the assimilated guilt of magnanimous compassion. This guilt, in its formal completion, fulfils and

secures the subject in its ambition to wholeness. The guilt is the pathway of entry into the domain of the woman. The dominant, in his expanded subject-hood, thus gains access to the predicaments of women. Nothing remains impervious to this man's realm of understanding and influence. This guilt is the way in to the forgetting of culpability. It remains as the reminder of one's own generosity.

At the other end of the spectrum would be the remorseless, unforgiving guilt that rents the subject-hood of man. The relentless memory of one's participation in the structure of phallogocentrism, intentional or not. To bear the marks of what one has done, done to the woman, to the possibilities one tore away from the mother, the friend, the wife or the daughter. Feminisms for men are marks of this guilt, the non-forgetting of structures and events that make one the 'man'. Out of a few rare instances of such unyielding remembering, I follow one literary example.

The young narrator of *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1998) stays in "a housing estate outside the town of Worcester" in South Africa. The boy, as he carries on with the life in the provincial town, sorely misses his earlier life in Cape Town, only ninety miles away yet better in all respects.

"His mother is restless too. I wish I had a horse, she says. Then at least I could go riding in the veld. A horse! says his father: Do you want to be Lady Godiva?"

She does not buy a horse. Instead, without warning, she buys a bicycle, a woman's model, second-hand, painted black. ...

She does not know how to ride a bicycle; perhaps she does not know how to ride a horse either. She bought the bicycle thinking that riding it would be a simple matter. Now she can find no one to teach her.

His father cannot hide his glee. Women do not ride bicycles, he says. His mother remains defiant. I will not be a prisoner in this house, she says. I will be free.

At first he had thought it splendid that his mother should have her own bicycle. He had even pictured the three of them riding together down Poplar Avenue, she and he and his brother. But now, as he listens to his father's jokes, which his mother can meet only with dogged silence, he begins to waver. Women don't ride bicycles: what if his father is right? If his

mother can find no one willing to teach her, if no other housewife in Reunion Park has a bicycle, then perhaps women are indeed not supposed to ride bicycles.

Alone in the back yard, his mother tries to teach herself. Holding her legs out straight on either side, she rolls down the incline toward the chicken-run. The bicycle tips over and comes to a stop. Because it does not have a crossbar, she does not fall, merely staggers about in a silly way, clutching the handlebars.

His heart turns against her. That evening he joins in with his father's jeering. He is well aware what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone.

Nevertheless she does learn to ride, though in an uncertain, wobbling way, straining to turn the heavy cranks.

She makes her expeditions to Worcester in the mornings, when he is at school. Only once does he catch a glimpse of her on her bicycle. She is wearing a white blouse and a dark skirt. She is coming down Poplar Avenue toward the house. Her hair streams in the wind. She looks young, like a girl, young and fresh and mysterious.

Every time his father sees the heavy black bicycle leaning against the wall he makes jokes about it. In his jokes the citizens of Worcester interrupt their business to stand and gape as the woman on the bicycle labours past *Trap! Trap!* they call out, mocking her: Push! There is nothing funny about the jokes, though he and his father always laugh together afterwards. As for his mother, she never has any repartee, she is not gifted in that way. 'Laugh if you like,' she says.

Then one day, without explanation, she stops riding the bicycle. Soon afterwards the bicycle disappears. No one says a word, but he knows she has been defeated, put in her place, and knows that he must bear part of the blame. I will make it up to her one day, he promises himself.

The memory of his mother on her bicycle does not leave him. She pedals away up Poplar Avenue, escaping from him, escaping towards her own desire. He does not want her to go. He does not want her to have a desire of her own. He wants her always to be in the house, waiting for him when he comes home. He does not often gang up with his father against her: his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father. But in this case he belongs with the men." (2-4)

The minimalist, stark non-description of the prose follows the boy's memory with a fact-like unattached cruelty. The adjectives I hereby use probably do disservice to the effects the prose produces. Analysis, even of an understanding kind, is not enough to describe the affect. The simplicity of the sympathy of the boy for the woman – a sympathy that the mature man might lose – the limits of this unexamined spontaneity when it faces the pulls of ideological machinations in their everydayness, and the gossamer-thin yet ineradicable traces of that lost impulse inscribe the text with a rare clarity. This probably is an instance where literature marks – in its own feminist ethico-political gesture – the itineraries of the different yet continuous movements, for a man, from inchoate feminist impulses to a feminist politics.

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