



Theorizing Feminist Research in Rural Areas of the Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper constructed on former work by the authors and on the succeeding literature. It argues that a feminist research provides a powerful tool in assisting us to understand women's lives, their experiences, their concerns based on gender discrimination. This paper seek for empowerment and liberation of women by conceptualizing and thinking about the findings of feminist researches which are often applied to promote social changes and social justice for women. The paper begins by outlining why the theorization of term 'feminist methodology' is used to tag an ideal approach for conducting feminist research which reveals that the basic premise of feminist theory is that women have been excluded from traditional philosophy. In Pakistan, especially in Punjab, women inferior and subordinated status is in practice, including women's political deprived affiliation to contest election and cast the vote. Such circumstances tend to make them less empowered. In addition, the relational analyses of liberal feminism and ethnographic structure of the Punjabi society shows a strong correlation that justifies the position of researchers to select a liberal feminist theory as a theoretical framework. The only way to bring changes in such traditional societies are gradual process of reforms. So, strategies of liberal feminists can be more successful as reformists rather than radicals, socialists and Marxists.

Key words : Feminist Research, Liberal feminists, Radical feminists, Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, women empowerment, Punjab.

Introduction

Feminist research is a process for the documentation of women's lives, their experiences, their concerns based on gender discrimination. It challenges the primary patriarchal systematic structure of women oppression. Fundamental goals of this research are empowerment and liberation of women and other marginalized communities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). So, feminist research includes women's experiences, oppression, inequalities, empowerment, socialization and subordinate status (Cosgrove & Mchugh, 2000). The findings of feminist research are often applied to promote social changes and social justice for women. Although, the basic purpose of feminist research is to understand the reasons for the subordinate status of women and causes of male domination, but in principal, the feminist researchers do not hold the same

theoretical and epistemological position (Letherby, 2003). So, whatever position they hold, one thing is common, they all take critical stance on women and are politically committed to feminism (Kemp & Squires, 1997).

The reason of disagreement among feminists is that the women of the globe do not have uniform experience, lives, race, class and culture. Moreover, their reasons for subordination varies from culture to culture and country to country. Therefore, there is no uniform method, methodology and epistemology for feminist research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). As far as the method is concerned, there is no distinction between feminist and non-feminist research. However, for methodology the term 'feminist methodology' is used to tag an ideal approach for conducting feminist research which reveals "what is going on in women's lives". Either some feminists use traditional methodologies, but most of them are continuously trying to develop new methodologies and epistemologies to discover the hidden aspects of women's lives and other oppressed groups.

Most of the feminist researchers challenge positivist claims to objectivity and value neutrality. Furthermore, they criticize the traditional standards and methods as women have been excluded throughout the course of history. Therefore, they focus on the development of alternative methodological frameworks by rejecting positivism completely. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006), this school of thought relies on "qualitative research as more consistent with their research objectives and guiding epistemological beliefs".

However, feminist empiricists, despite total rejection, are trying to improve the objectivity of the positivist approach by the inclusion of women in research samples. They also remodeled traditional positivist methods for greater reflection of women's experiences. This school of researchers believes that new positivist research techniques with the inclusion of women in sample will increase the potential of research findings for neutrality, objectivity and generalizability.

Some recent feminist researchers not only challenge the methodology but also the epistemological assumptions. They question the viability and utility of neutral research and concept



of objectivity in positivism. According to them, neutral research cannot provide full voice to women's experiences. There must be a clear separation between subject and object in positivist research model, which is not possible in feminist research because feminist research and feminist struggle are the two cords of a twisted cable. Therefore, feminists openly question the ethics of positivist design. Feminists design their own innovative epistemological framework by rejecting traditional positivistic model. It offers new techniques and applications which are necessary and give importance to personal experiences, subjectivity, positionality, worldview and emotions. According to Borland (1991), feminists openly accept their own positionality and engagement with their respondents throughout all phases from data collection to analysis and report writing.

No matter which technique, method, methodology or epistemological framework feminist researchers chose to conduct their feminist research, however, one thing is common which is the use of theory. It is the important component of research; however, the use of theory may vary according to method. Theory can be used in quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods research in alternative ways. Quantitative research often tests theories, while the use of theory in qualitative varies up to some extent. In qualitative research, theory may be an outcome in the end, or it may also become in the beginning of study to provide a lens such as in transformative research. Similarly, in mixed methods, theory may be tested or generated. Moreover, in feminist research using mixed methods, researchers may draw theoretical framework from feminist, racial and class theories to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Feminist Theories

Feminist theory is generalized which is not a work of individual but an interdisciplinary community. This is considered women-centered because its major objective is to investigate social experiences of women as an oppressed group and to produce a better world for women (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008). Despite variations in thoughts, all feminists believe that patriarchal and traditional way of thinking (gender stereotyping) support the subordinate status of the women and neglect those issues of community which affect women. So, a new social order rather patriarchy is required for gender equality (R. Tong, 2001). This belief provides basic structure to all feminist theories.

Although, the basic belief in the foundation of feminist theory appears very simple but is tedious and difficult to understand it as a new critical way of "out of the box" thinking. To explain the situation, Smulders (1998) claims that culture is undeniable fact of human which assigns the roles and duties to humans by defining gender roles. These roles are not fair and compatible with modern age and are ancient based on gender discrimination which express that women have less potential and abilities as compared to men. Feminists believe that present cultural norms/factors are developed under patriarchy which portray a typical submissive role of women.

This theory identifies many flaws in traditional philosophy and gives a unique way of thinking about issues that not only affects women but human beings and the world as well. According to Tong (2001), "*the basic premise of feminist theory is that women have been excluded from traditional philosophy; moreover, not only have women been excluded, but also people of different economic classes, races, ethnicities, or nationalities*".

Despite all, this theory is not so simple and uniform due to three reasons which are, cross disciplinary work, variation in feminists' thoughts (Rosemarie Tong, 2018) and various groups of the women around the world with varying experiences, races, classes & cultures (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). So, feminist theory is further divided into sub-theories like liberal, Marxist, socialist, radical, modern, postmodern, structuralist, poststructuralist etc. These different labels of sub-theories not only indicate towards different feminist thoughts but also point out various approaches, perspectives and frameworks which are used by feminists to explain women's situations and to propose solutions for their empowerment and liberation.

Liberal Feminist Theory

Rosemarie Tong (2018) writes in her book "*feminist thoughts*" that the work of Mary Wollstonecraft (A Vindication of the Rights of Women), John Stuart Mill (The Subjection of Women) and women's suffrage movement of nineteenth century are the nucleus seeds of liberal feminism (Code, 2000). Liberal feminists are known as moderate because they accept and focus on basic organization of society rather than revolutionary changes in contrast with other feminists (Nehere, 2016). Liberal feminism is an expression of gender inequality theory and believes that gender inequality is the result of gender patterning in division of labor and equality can be produced by transforming the division of labor by



restructuring of key institutes like law, work, family and education (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008). John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) has focused on issues of education and equal rights for women to achieve equality within the sexes.

The fundamental claim of liberal feminists is gender equality with the beliefs such as, capabilities of human beings for reason, moral agency and self-actualization, assurance of legal laws for exercising the capabilities, unnatural social gender roles and state intervention with organized public appeal.

Contemporary feminists perceive gender as a socially constructed complex structure to exploit women by producing gendered division of labor. They further consider it as a cultural dimension of sexist ideology (Risman, 2004). Under patriarchal ideology about division of work, women are responsible for work at homes, while men are eligible for public sphere means more power, more money, better status, freedom, more opportunities for growth and self-worth. Women find their experience limited due to discrimination, marginalization, harassment and restricted mobility within public life and find themselves in a "time bind" as they return home from job, to "a second shift" at homes (McDowell, 2008). This demand of the private life hinders women ability to excel in public life.

Such situation regarding gendered division of labor is risky for women especially for single mothers and the major cause of feminization of poverty (Hays, 2003). Liberal feminists believe that one of the basic issues faced by the women, is inequality in marriages. According to classic studies of Jessie Bernard (*The Future of Marriage*, 1972/1982), the institution of marriage gives freedom and sexual power to male. According to marriage institution males are above domestic responsibilities. While women become powerless, dependent and self-emptying in marriage contracts and responsible for providing domestic, caring, emotional and sexual services to men. Traditional marriages are dumping women into isolation within homes. According to the study of Steil (1997), married women and unmarried men have high level stress as compared to unmarried women and married men.

Similarly, lack of personal autonomy also hinders women empowerment. Liberal feminism holds that women should enjoy personal autonomy and conceives "freedom" as personal autonomy, which means "living a life of one's own choosing" and political autonomy means "being co-author of the conditions under which one lives". According to liberal feminism philosophy, the exercise of

personal autonomy depends on certain enabling conditions, which are as follows:

1) "*Being free of violence and the threat of violence*": violence and threat of violence harm dignity and sense of self-respect of women (Brison, 2018), and play a significant role in disempowerment of women by limiting their activities. 2) "*Being free of the limits set by patriarchal, paternalistic and moralistic laws*": patriarchal, paternalistic and moralistic laws control the women according to socially preferred ways of life and restrict women choices. Liberal feminists believe that women should be guided by their own sense according to their own self-interest and own values despite set by society (Brake, 2004). 3) "*Having access to option*": according to liberal feminism view, women have right to access options, but their economic deprivation limits their access to options (Cudd, 2006). Other causes include education, employment opportunities, stereotype thinking and gender discrimination (Baehr & Amy, 2013). Sometimes culture also limits women's options (Cudd, 2006), for example, socially constructed roles on the basis of sex. 4) "*The ability to assess one's own preferences and imagine life otherwise*": this is internal psychological enabling condition (Cudd, 2006), but is also related to external enabling conditions (Chambers, 2008). Violence and threat of violence, economic deprivation, patriarchal institutions like marriage, traditional cultural norms, stereotyping and gender discrimination are limiting internal psychological ability of the women to choose options.

Liberal feminists claim that there is a deficit of enabling conditions in women's lives and existing social arrangements which fail to give personal autonomy to women, especially in developing countries. They hold that this situation is due to the patriarchal nature of inherited traditions and institutions. In this regard, liberal feminists believe in state intervention. According to them, the state can and should become allies of the women's movement in promoting women's autonomy by suitable law making.

The liberal feminists are working on the basic philosophy of women's liberation and equality by accepting basic organization of society, but hold that women do not yet share the same rights as men that is ultimately applicable in the current study. The concept of relating women's inferiority with their biological and intellectual capacities is irrational. Rather, it is rooted in their inferior education and inequality found in formal and informal laws. In this regard, need of reforms and



modification in old values remains a primary concern for liberal feminists. Liberal Feminism is primarily concerned with giving equal and the same opportunities to both men and women in education.

Women should have easy and equal access to law and law enforcement agencies, voting and property rights. Liberal feminists stress on equality in job opportunities for both men and women. They are demanding powerful position for women in both governmental and private sectors. For them, discrimination is not an outcome of laws; rather male dominance and male oriented values that create such discrimination against women.

Criticism of Liberal Feminist Theory

Old customs and traditional legal framework are the main causes of women's subordination. The Society's false belief that women with less creative and low intellectual level are not capable than men physically. Such conditions lead to gender discrimination. Liberal feminists think that this discrimination is unfair, and they insist on gender justices to liberate and empower women.

Radical feminists disagree with the philosophy of liberals. According to them, liberals' roadmap is not enough to bring women out of oppression, so, they totally reject the existing patriarchal structure. Radical school defines a patriarchal system by power, dominance, hierarchy and competition, therefore, system support to gender justice is impossible. Reforms within the system are useless. The only way to get rid of this system, is to nip the evil in the bud. It is not the legal and political structures of patriarchal system only, but also social institutions (family and religion) which have to be invalidated to liberate the women.

Radical philosophers focus on sex, gender, and reproduction as locus for women's development. In radical philosophy perspective, men exploit women through sexual relations and status (Lewis, 2007). Patriarchal norms support men to suppress women by sexual oppression. In this connection, capitalism favor patriarchy by rejecting homosexual marriages and lesbianism (Foord & Gregson, 1986). Capitalism perceives women as a mean of reproduction, so this agenda embeds norm in patriarchy that men are biologically stronger than women. Radical feminists have strongly believed that patriarchy is based on sexual objectification of women's body. So, they want to replace the existing structure of systematic oppression with new one, based on gender equality, rather reforms within the existing system (Waterman, 1993).

Based on thoughts about sex and reproduction, radical feminists disagree each other. Some of them are in favor of androgyny (term defined by British sexologist Havelock Ellis). While others reject it by highlighting danger of heterosexual sex. Some anti-androgynists question the low value that patriarchy is assigned to feminine qualities than masculine qualities (Vetterling-Braggin, 1982) and claim if society accepts the both with equal value, then there will be no problem. On the other hand, some other anti-androgynists disagree with this thought and consider femininity as a problem because it is constructed by men to serve patriarchy.

Radical-cultural feminists claim that men have caged women's sexuality through pornography, prostitution, rape, purdah, clitoridectomy, and gynecology for their own pleasure (Daly, 2016). Thus, escape from heterosexuality (through celibacy, autoeroticism or lesbianism) is necessary to liberate women. Radical-libertarian feminists claim that motherhood biologically drains women and have worst effects on their physical and psychological state. It should be in control of woman that how she wants to use reproduction-controlling and reproduction-assisting technologies (Tong, 2018). Any woman can carry children but at her own terms and conditions of 'when' (premenopausal or post-menopausal), 'how' (from own womb, from other woman's womb, or third option will be available in future with artificial placenta) and with 'whom' (a man, a woman, or alone).

In contrast, radical-cultural feminists perceive women's motherhood as a source of power for them (Trebilcot, 1984). Woman can use this biological power of reproduction in a political manner in her own interest. Women can enjoy their 'life-giving' power by determining whether the human species continues or not. If women withdraw from motherhood, then men will have less respect than they have now (Corea, 1986).

It is difficult to explain the complete range of radical ideas on gender regarding sexuality because sexual desire varies person to person and no experiment can be referred 'the best' for women (Vance, 1984). Every woman should be free to do sexual experiments with herself, with other woman, or even with men though it can be dangerous for women in patriarchal setting. Women should feel free to follow the lead of their own desire. Despite all, radical feminists overall reject sexual relation with men (Miller, 2007). According to them, men are not necessary for women, and the extinction of nuclear families is vital to liberate women. Under this agenda, politically they recognized lesbianism



as a tool against male dominance (Nardi & Schneider, 1998; Pomeroy, Holleran, & Kiam, 2004).

In contrast to liberal and radical feminists, Marxist and socialist feminists focus on economic conditions of women as locus point of their underdeveloped status (Moghadam, 1992). According to this school of thought it is impossible for women to gain liberation within class-based society. They emphasize that women oppression has roots in the institution of private property (Engels, 1884). Imperialism has introduced this institution and capitalism further strengthened it by introducing private ownership of the means of production. This ownership has created a class-system and men supported this system because it is in favor of patriarchy. Although, capitalism does not give preference to men over women, but it itself is the cause of women's oppression. Women are the fifty percent of the total population of the globe and if this fifty percent population is liberated then this liberation must replace the capitalism with socialism where the means of production will be considered as common property and women would be independent economically like men. Socialist feminists agree that capitalism (like Marxist feminists) and patriarchy (like radical feminists) are the two sources of women's oppression and the only way to liberate women is the killing of this two-headed monster.

Situation Analysis

The situation of women in the Punjab, Pakistan is very alarming regarding their status, empowerment, and gender gap. According to World Economic Forum, women status in Pakistan is very poor and gender gaps are very wide in terms of women education, health services, economic and political participation. Furthermore, Pakistan is the lowest ranked country in South Asia with overall gender gap of fifty-five percent (WEF, 2018).

In Pakistan, situation regarding women empowerment is little better in metropolitan cities, but the situation is worst in small cities, towns, and rural areas. It is worth mentioning here that seventy percent of the total population is settled in rural areas of Pakistan. Rural women in the Punjab are facing high levels of discrimination in every aspect of life. The Pandora box of discrimination always remains open in the life of rural women including restricted mobility, lack of education & health facilities, non-availability of economic opportunities, unpaid jobs, wage gap, workplace harassment, intimate partner violence, inflexible long-working hours, double working shift (at

workplace then at homes), absence in political process, conflicts with intimate partner and overburdened household responsibilities along with extra care work (Abrar-ul-haq, Jali, & Islam, 2016; Adeel, Yeh, & Zhang, 2017; Batool & Batool, 2018; Butt & Asad, 2016b, 2016a; Choudhry, Mutalib, & Ismail, 2019; Ishaq & Memon, 2016; Jamal, 2016; Khurshid, 2016; Murshid & Critelli, 2017; Qaisrani, Liaquat, & Khokhar, 2016; Rafay, Habib, Tariq, & Asghar Ali, 2016; Sasaquat & Sheikh, 2011).

Most of the problems faced by Pakistani women (reported by recent studies; mentioned above) are those which European and American women have faced in the nineteenth century. They have liberated themselves by getting their rights through the struggle of the first feminist wave, but Pakistani women, especially in rural areas of the Punjab are still facing those problems. More research is required in Pakistan to understand women's oppression in-depth and feminists' call for action research is vital to liberate them from centuries old patriarchal norms.

Conclusion

Which theoretical perspective or lens is better for 'call for action' feminist research? It depends upon the condition of women in a particular society and the type of society. Religious orthodoxy is prominent in Pakistani society along with centuries old patriarchal social code of conduct. Due to orthodoxy and patriarchal culture, Pakistani society always resists strongly against any change. Even women resist change and adhere to patriarchal norms. Revolutionary changes are never welcomed by people of such societies. The only way to bring changes in such traditional societies are gradual process of reforms. So, strategies of liberal feminists can be more successful as reformists rather than radicals, socialists and Marxists.

Liberal philosophy explains women oppression in terms of unequal rights and focus on individual freedom to liberate women. Liberal feminists are struggling for equal social, legal and political rights and access to every woman for educational, health, and economic opportunities which are the real issues of Pakistani women. According to them, government intervention through gender friendly law making is vital in the existing social structure to gain gender equality. Furthermore, they also demand reformation of institution under new rules and regulations for achieving equality among gender.

On the other end, Marxist and socialist feminists analyze women exploitation in industrial mode of



production which is not suitable in the Punjab as an agrarian society with feudal norms. Radical feminists focus sexuality and believe that sexual objectification of female is the base of patriarchy. According to them, heterosexual relations through marriages are dangerous for women, so, they are in favor of homosexual marriages and lesbianism. They also believe that motherhood drains women physically and mentally, so they discuss the role of reproduction-controlling and reproduction-assisting technologies, as to how these technologies create oppression for women and give favor to men. All such problems may be the real issues in advanced societies of Europe and America but underdeveloped societies like the Punjab, Pakistan are not so much developed to understand such problems as they are trapped in basic issues like education, health and economic related opportunities. Furthermore, being a religious society, people are not ready to talk about such advance issues.

Due to lack of education and being a religious orthodoxy, Punjabi society is considered very tedious. Feminists must be careful and tricky to handle religious/spiritual beliefs of the society. For a positive change, a successful struggle to integrate feministic views into religious framework is needed. In this regard, Malaysia is the perfect example, the original Malays (Bumiputera) are holding conservative religious thoughts but their women are very much empowered. They are so much empowered that they can do anything without any sort of social restriction. Malaysian state and feminists took very simple steps to empower their women. Malaysian state added an article in its eighth national plan that education is compulsory for every woman and feminists took religious leaders on board for their own feminist

agenda. This combined strategy of Malaysian state and feminists proved very successful, so feminists in Pakistan may also try the same strategy to improve the condition of women empowerment.

Similarly, liberal feminist theory also provides best theoretical lens for conducting feminist research in a traditional rural society of the Punjab, Pakistan, where the patriarchal norms are deeply rooted. Previous studies also report that in the rural areas life has narrow space for women's liberation and provision of equal rights. The circumstances of women in present community of the Punjab, (where institutional network and codes of life are patriarchal and inherited traditions govern the life of women) resemble with the women of Europe and America who have also faced the same circumstances in nineteenth century during first wave of feminism. In Pakistan, especially in Punjab, all institutions are male driven and male interpreted laws (both formal and traditional) are in practice. Overall decisions are made by the males including women's political affiliation and empowerment. Such circumstances tend to make women inferior and subordinate. Women are also deprived of contesting election and cannot cast their vote willingly in the Punjab, Pakistan.

The liberal feminist philosophy provides information and techniques for change and implementation of rules within the society which can make women as equal citizens to male counterparts. This kind of approach is very much productive in Punjabi society. In addition, the relational analyses of liberal feminism and ethnographic structure of the Punjabi society show a strong correlation which justifies the position of researchers to select liberal feminist theory as a theoretical framework for feminist research.

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