

Women on women: exploring the possibilities of a feminist ethnography in Pakistan

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PART I. Posing the question.

1. The Research Framework promises to address “a knowledge gap” in women’s empowerment and develop “new narratives”. The production of new knowledge requires an interrogation of earlier knowledge about women living in Muslim societies.
2. One of the sites for the production of new knowledge is the examination of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. This paper is then not about the subjects of research but about writing the feminist researcher into the text and her ability for self reflexivity in unpacking local gender regimes, producing textual analyses from field encounters, and presenting these facts before an audience to whom the context is foreign.
3. One issue is also that ethnography and anthropology were set up as colonial disciplines to study native societies for better administration. How do feminists then do anthropology at home without replaying the colonial encounter?
4. The other issue is that feminism is a prescriptive politics and that may hold in tension the ability of the researcher to access the analytics where research findings may not further previously held feminist perspectives on say women’s empowerment. So how then do we produce new knowledge about women’s condition?
5. The concern here is therefore not with *methodology* but *epistemology* in terms of how knowledge is produced and disseminated, especially knowledge about others. For instance, according to the representational theory of knowledge, facts and data are just out there to be apprehended by an observer. According to this subscription, the historicity of the encounter and the political location of the subject and the object of research are completely side stepped.
6. Yet another concern voiced by some feminist ethnographers is that the male/female binary in which research encounters are set up is reductive and ignores other articulations of sexuality. They argue whether women are a category of analysis at all if gender is calibrated against class, race, geographical location, language, and various other variables.
7. Example from one representative ethnographic novel by Sara Suleri who teaches at Yale University and believes ‘There are no women in the third world’.

PART II. Field encounters. Naming the Subject.

8. The reluctance of women to own individual names or to share them with researchers. Older women are often referred to by their sons’ names. Other women too use relational names. Only school going girls proudly claim individual names. Asking the name is culturally inappropriate since older people are not asked this question by younger ones.

9. In asking for a name, the researcher is also placing the woman in a juridical model of citizenship that assumes that names refer to individuals who participate in public processes like registration of birth, in school registration, for identity cards and ration cards, registration in voters' lists and so on. Since in a weak State like Pakistan, women are not generally considered an important part of the social order, naming is not of much consequence to them.
10. Naming is about social control. Example: the ID cards made for women councilors are in the safe keeping of the zamindar, as reported by a recently elected woman MPA (Shameela)..
11. In general elections , February 2008, the women who were registered as voters turned the vote bank in favour of the assassinated leader Benazir Bhutto not because they believed in the State's authority or in the politics of the PPP government that has already been in office twice with no significant development agenda for the poor and for women.
12. Women did not see themselves as voters or as citizens of the State who demanded their rights or even social and juridical justice, rather theirs was a politics of love, a term coined by a women's rights activist, because they wished to give something to Benazir Bhutto as the wronged woman.
13. Resistance...when women talked about sexuality...when they were extremely impoverished...blaming the modernity of the researcher...the lack of family values...anger, derisive laughter, calling researchers "honorary males" with access to the social capital of western modernity.
14. Response...not only an issue of *representation*, of who speaks on whose behalf, but the ability to listen and to hear what women say about their lives...not a failure of *language* when women don't respond to words like empowerment or subjective freedom but cognitive dissonance between the researcher and the researched.
15. For instance, in conceiving of women as individuals desirous of freedom of choice, perhaps the fundamentalist feminist principle. Both individuality and freedom need to be seen as historically evolved conceptualization that have been naturalized as what every woman desires across time and space. Societies have been known to function along other principles and still do. There is a need to understand relational societies and how women inhabit the norms and the mores rather than casting the problem as one of social/cultural/religious subjection and individual resistance.
16. One response to writing about others can be for the ethnographer to forgo the authority and the claim of writing the incontrovertible truths and instead to call their work a reading or an interpretation that may as well be fictional.