

REVERSING THE 'PRIVILEGE OF HISTORY:' THE GLOBAL SUBJECTS OF INDIAN FEMINISM

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Abstract:

This paper examines the history of Indian feminism during the 1970s and 1980s by comparing two groups of women from the 'Global Feminisms Project' archive: those whose activism (defined broadly to encompass the political, cultural, and academic realms) began in the 1970s and those who became active in the women's movement during the 1980s. It engages in a comparative historical analysis of the feminist subjects produced during these two moments of Indian history with those of U.S. Western and third-world feminisms. This methodology enables a reading of the histories of global feminism that is able to discern the particularity of national configurations of class, gender, religious, ethnic and cultural differences. Tracing the shifting narratives of feminism that position subjects to speak from (the politics of opposition), speak as (the politics of identity), and speak for and to (the politics of representation) other women, I show how both middle class and 'grassroots' activists evince split subjectivities that are not autonomous from but relational to differently classed subjects. Drawing parallels to U.S. third world feminism, I highlight the distinctiveness of Indian feminisms and their universal significance for global feminisms.

"[O]ur context is different. We not only have a women's movement going back to the social reform era of the 19th century, but an equally long engagement with English. The Indian discourse in English is therefore effectively 150 years old and our conceptual vocabulary, including feminism and women's studies, has developed out of this history, making it somewhat different from western feminism. Categories have been thrown up and debated in the context of our campaigns and struggles, though articulated in English, which therefore appear indistinguishable from western concepts. It could be both a problem and a strength that most of the time we are carrying out debates internally with each other in a large country like India ... But the

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result of all this is that western feminism is not an immediate reference for our ongoing concerns, and that we have limited engagements with Indian scholars living in the west or western scholars writing on India.

Mary John, *Women and Feminism in China and India*

Recent approaches on *trans*-national feminisms notwithstanding, it is the claim of this paper that national spaces are important sites in which particular universalisms are shaped and determined. The diverse histories of feminism are entangled with the histories of nations, and the political, economic, and cultural relations of exchange and domination among nations, troubling any easy comparison of women's movements. As Mary John suggests (in the context of a dialogue between Indian feminists Nivedita Menon, Tejaswini Niranjana and herself with Chinese feminist, Li Xiaojiang) even when we use a shared language, the problem of incommensurable concepts and categories is always already present, though less easily discerned.¹ While John acknowledges the potential pitfalls of an internally directed and nationally specific dialogue, the 'difference' of Indian feminist discourse has usually been articulated in terms of its distance from 'Western' feminism. This paper considers this use of the 'West' as an assumed referent for global feminisms, and addresses some of the larger theoretical questions that animated the Global Feminisms Project (GFP). These questions revolved around the possibility of using transnational feminist practices to produce more democratic histories of global feminisms.² Thus in our conversations and work, we were asking: Who are the subjects of feminism and how have they been formed? When, where and what is the 'global'?

In framing the question in this manner, I will not take time here to unpack the semantics of the 'global,' even though this term is certainly in need of deconstruction. Nor will I be principally concerned with tracing the actual points of contact between Indian and international feminists. Rather, this paper traces the shifting meanings of key categories in

contemporary Indian feminism (and of feminisms elsewhere)—class, development, state, culture, religion, the secular, the personal—in order to demonstrate the multiple modalities, including temporalities, flows, and spaces of ‘global’ feminisms. My central focus is on questions of difference and their effects on the forms of identification with, and historical constitution of the subject in, Indian feminism. Examples from project interviews that relate to key issues that the Indian women’s movement (IWM) has confronted in the postcolonial period, and especially during the 1970s and 1980s, will be this paper’s avenue. It will allow considering how the historicity of geographically-sited feminisms have been produced through their engagement with social movements, the nation state, and their transnational dialogues. It will also enable showcasing the theoretical analyses and political strategies of the feminist activists and academics who we interviewed. Some unpacking of my vocabulary may be in order here: by ‘historicity,’ I mean to refer to the understanding that historical difference and particularity are both constitutive of universal narratives and yet not reducible or external to them. There is thus an inherent instability in universal categories: “The universal turns out to be an empty place holder whose unstable outlines become barely visible only when a proxy, a particular, usurps its position in a gesture of pretension and domination.” This universal is thus always a “historical particular seeking to present itself as the universal.”³ By using the term ‘temporality,’ I am insisting that we recognize the heterogeneity of time without reducing differences into the empty homogeneous linear time of modernity—for example by marking difference as before - after, or old - new. The coeval presence of multiple modes of being requires the recognition of a “plurality of times existing together.”⁴ These two precepts help demonstrate that national feminisms are neither wholly different from nor exact replicas of each other. In other words it is not that feminist concepts cannot travel or are untranslatable, but that the specific meaning that they take at any given location or moment is always inflected by their discursive political history

in concrete contexts, which do not exist outside of but are constituted within global narratives about universal feminism.

One of the problems with the 'global' is that it acts as an empty signifier that is presumptively 'Western' and grandiosely all encompassing, yet only ever nominally inclusive in reality. This immediately falls on another assumption: that the 'West' or 'Western' is singular, homogeneous, and therefore hegemonic in its binary construction vis-à-vis the 'Rest'.⁵ Perhaps this might explain the disavowal of significant contact with "Indian scholars living in the west or western scholars writing on India" in the prologue. But to mark the boundary of an authentic ground of the "Indian" women's movement, feminism, and women's studies belies the reality of long-standing transnational conversations on the ground, as the intellectual biographies and political engagements of many activists indicates. It also risks an insularity that misrecognizes the productive tension between universal constructs and their provincial articulations, between hegemonic proclamations and counter-hegemonic disavowals, in the construction of alter/native universalisms.⁶

Since this paper draws on the GFP archive, I ground this ambiguous construct of the 'West' in the particular example of the United States. This has the benefit of specifying the nature of these differences without reifying the West. It also enables an examination of the specific flow of ideas between actually existing geographic and rhetorical locations. We also need to avoid homogenizing US feminism which occludes the many counterhegemonic currents within in it. Thus, I use the term 'U.S. western feminism' when I refer to its historically hegemonic forms (liberal, white, middle class feminisms); this term stands as a counterpoint to what Chela Sandoval refers to as 'U.S. third world feminism,'⁷ which our project highlighted with its production of a new archive of U.S. feminisms. Because of the prolonged era of British colonial rule in India, the pre-history of our interviewees' engagements with feminism were not

unmarked by British imperialism and the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Despite India's socialist-style planned economic development with inward-directed growth policies after independence in 1947, and its founding role in the non-aligned movement, it was nonetheless significantly impacted by the post-WWII Pax Americana global regime in early decades of the post-colonial era. Together, these two historic influences of British colonialism and US imperialism in pre- and post-independent India form the context of the 'West' as I deploy it in this paper.

Narratives of Feminism

The quandary of representation has been central to feminist discourse. Our project struggled with this issue time and again in producing our archive, and in this paper, I confront this issue head-on as I undertake an initial working through of the complex materials that we gathered and their potential to re-conceptualize "global feminism." First let us consider just one passage from our interviews, many more of which I will turn to below. Shahjehan Appa, about whom we will learn more later on, recounted what she went through when she became active in the IWM. At this point, the reader should know that she is a Muslim woman who became an activist in the course of seeking justice for her daughter's murder, who was killed by her husband and his family in their pursuit for more dowry after she was married. Here is an excerpt from Appa's narrative about how she sought justice for her daughter's murder:

I have to tell you that when I first became conscious, I felt that I should not wear the *burqa* and move out. I felt that I wouldn't be able to do my work properly if I did not remove my *burqa* because some people will identify with me and some won't. But if I remove my *burqa* then everyone will be able to identify with me and so I removed my *burqa*. People in my house were the first ones to oppose me. [...] After my daughter died, I

threw away my *burqa*. I stepped out in such a way that my own people refused to recognize me. But if my own deserted me, strangers accepted me. The best thing was that the stains in my life were wiped out and I started working with the people in such a way that I forgot my grief [...] I feel that all the daughters in the country are my daughters. [...] Feminism, women's perspective, women's movement are all very important issues for us. ... We're not raising just one issue, there are men with us; our daughters and sons are with us ... [The] women's movement is my life, the most important issue of my life ... I am thankful that this women's movement began and that I was a part of it.

Appa believed that her work in the anti-dowry and violence against women campaigns would be impaired if she retained her *burqa* because only some people would identify with her as a Muslim woman. She therefore discarded this visible and public identifier of her religion so that "everyone" could identify with her, despite her Muslim name, Shahjehan. While she sought to have non-feminist women—other mothers and family members of girls who were murdered for their dowry—identify with her, she identified with the women's movement, which had become like family to her when she was abandoned by her own community and family. She therefore adopts the habitus of mainstream (Hindu) feminists and, in so doing, implicitly sanctions its narrative about Muslim patriarchy's oppressiveness. Shedding her *burqa* became her means of identification with, and signification of, Indian feminist modernity. Speaking in the familiar feminist trope of coming to 'consciousness,' her story charts a powerful narrative about her political transformation. The ontological rupture in her life and the pain that is caused by her daughter's death is sutured by a transformation in consciousness that comes about when she locates her personal experience in the social and cultural imaginary of the 1980s, when dowry deaths emerged as a visible public phenomena in north India and as a pressing political issue in the women's movement. Appa's narrative suggests a multiplicity of locations

that define different aspects of her identity in relation to feminism. But she collapses these into a single subject position when she ‘speaks from’ her location as a Muslim woman. She identifies with feminism, yet she locates it as ‘other’ to Muslim womanhood. In keeping with this dualism, she believes that she ‘becomes’ a feminist when she discards her *burqa*.

Addressing the problem of representation in feminist discourse Ellen Rooney has posited three narrative forms that make literal and produce the feminist subject—the “I”— that result from different modes of ‘narrative enunciation.’⁸ Her formulation of feminist narratives is a useful heuristic device through which to trace the emergent subjectivities and shifting subjects of Indian feminism. This is because it looks to the *narrative structure* of locution in feminist discourse, rather than its *narrative content* to distinguish between subject positions within feminism. This methodology, which hails from structuralism but which she and I deploy for poststructuralist ends, can therefore be productively applied in a comparative historical analysis without presuming a universal telos of social movements and their concerns. These narrative forms need some elaboration before we can continue. Along with Rooney’s formulation, I also draw on conceptions of the feminist subject that have been developed by Indian and U.S. third world feminists. This framework enables a comparative reading of the life stories of activists in the Indian women’s movement (hereafter IWM), and of Indian feminism, vis-à-vis ‘global’ feminism.

Rooney’s three narrative forms may be summarized as “speaking from,” “speaking as,” and “speaking for” or “speaking to.” The first of these (*‘I tell my story as the story of your feminism’*) addresses the feminist as other while the narrator “resists” and “disavows” her own positioning as a feminist subject, “merely registering an entirely appropriate acknowledgement of the greater or somehow different authority of feminism as such.”⁹ It allows for the narrator’s appropriation

of feminism while maintaining an opposition or distance between the narrator and the narrative of feminism. I extend her use of this narrative form to characterize one possible position of 'other' women (whether non-, pre-, nascent, or alternative feminists) to dominant feminist discourses. The speaking subject's appropriation of, but *gapped identification* with, feminism retains a sense of her difference as long as that feminism treats her as the object of its discourse. In other words, I suggest that this subject's ambivalence positions her to '*speak from*' a location that lies outside the domain of prevailing hegemonic feminism, while she desires to (and perhaps does) enter into it. Appa's story fits this narrative form as she talked of shedding her *burqa* to become a feminist. However, it is also the case that she is transformed by the experiences of her daughter's murder, and therefore simultaneously occupies the subject position of one who 'speaks as' a woman, which is captured in Rooney's second narrative form.

The narrative form—"I *tell my story as the story of my feminism*"—has dominated second wave US western feminism. It draws on the experience of the narrator; it "is almost always to speak 'as a woman,' with all the pitfalls that attend that figure."¹⁰ It narrates a "tear in subjectivity," as a "break [that] exposes femininity as ideology, that is, as a structure we inhabit."¹¹ It rests on "the authority of a critical subject with a necessary and direct relation to her own experience" to reveal the personal as political and the false universalisms of phallocentrism. The problem of representation in this narrative form is eluded; it is "understood solely as inclusion" into what is, at best, a pluralist community.¹² In global feminist terms, this would lead to the elaboration of multiple feminisms, each with its own construction of female identity and feminist position, which exist in a pluralist and relative, rather than a contrapuntal and relational, world. This narrative is structurally similar to the feminist subject position in Anglo-American feminism that Alarcon characterizes as '*identification*' with the unitary identity

of 'woman.'¹³ It displaces other forms of differences (for example, of race, class, sexuality, and nation) to the margins through the conflation of "feminine identity and feminist position."¹⁴ In addition to identification, Alarcon notes that women's '*counter-identification*' with men has been another important element of the feminist subject in radical and cultural US western feminism. It also assumes that gender transcends other forms of difference, and leads to a politics of gender separatism. Neither of these subject positions adequately describes the feminisms of US third world and non-western women, for whom gender may not be pivotal to their politics and who see men as critical allies in their struggles. Indian feminists have likewise been critical of western feminism for being gender separatist, and for overemphasizing personal politics that are narrowly concerned with sexual politics.¹⁵

The third narrative form "*I tell your story as the story of my feminism*," is a direct form of address, a speaking to, "as it travels across political and communal boundaries."¹⁶ It is not, Rooney insists, '*speaking for*' others or a form of translation where I pull elements of "your' *proper* feminism out of 'your narrative,'" (i.e. that I would select elements from your narrative that meet my criterion of feminism).¹⁷ But she also concedes that there is no guarantee that this feminist narrative position will not result in my appropriation of your narrative, thereby maintaining differences in the structures of power and knowledge. Working against the backdrop of a long history of such hegemonic appropriations in US western feminism, Rooney looks hopefully to postcolonial feminist narratives that do not 'speak for' the other, but which instead seek to unravel how subjects' '*speak to*' us.¹⁸ In this idealized act of representation, I imbibe elements of your story that speak to and inform my feminism; I therefore assume that your story and life is *contemporaneously* relevant and can transform my feminism in the present, rather than presuming that I have a didactic role in the feminist (re)telling of your story as the *history* of my feminism.

These narrative forms of address encompass a range of feminist subject positions. They all posit the identification of women with feminism, regardless of whether that feminism marks the speaking subject, as in the second and third narratives, or the object, as in the first one. The first narrative acknowledges a possible gap between ‘woman’ and ‘feminist,’ and hence admits that the distance between them may not only be one of degree but could also be oppositional or *anti-feminist*. But Rooney provides no narrative for the position of women who identify with the politics of feminism but who do not find themselves represented in it as ‘women.’ In her schema, one may have a distant or oppositional identification, complete identification, and identification across differences between women and feminism. Extending Rooney’s first narrative form, I suggested that a ‘gapped identification’ represents a subject’s ambivalence towards feminism when they are not represented in feminist discourse, except as its objects. But there is no enunciative position in her narrative framework for “*disidentification*” with feminism,¹⁹ which has been the primary subject position adopted by U.S. third world feminists in relation to Anglo-American feminism, and which also characterizes Indian feminism, especially since the 1990s.

My formulation unites Rooney’s formulation with Alarcon’s construct of disidentification and Sandoval’s theorization of the differential consciousness of U.S. third world feminists. The disidentified feminists’ position is not comparable to those who ‘speak as’ (and therefore for all) women. Rather, her subject position is produced as an *effect* of that discourse which silently constitutes her as the Other. She disclaims not only the politics and essentialism of identity (speaking as), but also the politics of opposition (speaking from) and the politics of representation (speaking for) when these are posited as univalent, singular strategies. Recognizing her exclusion from all three subject positions that have constituted hegemonic feminist discourse, this subject is forced to confront that history of feminism in the

telling of her own story, producing a narrative that is inherently relational and which *speaks to* it. Drawing on Alarcon, I seek to extend the potential agency of the speaking feminist subject in global feminist discourse to its erstwhile objects—non-western and proto-feminist others. The narrative stance of feminist ‘disidentification,’ which describes the ‘differential consciousness’ of the subjects of U.S. third world feminism, can also describe the locutional standpoint and consciousness of the subjects of non-western feminism in global feminist discourse.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has made abundantly clear that one of the key mechanisms and representational vehicles for asserting Western superiority, hegemony, and ‘progress’ has been the figure of the ‘third world woman.’²⁰ Feminist scholarship on gender, no less than the broader humanistic and social sciences, has participated equally in this formulation of the ‘West’ as ahead of the ‘Rest.’ Defining sex, gender, and sexuality as the true objects of ‘feminism,’ US western feminism installed itself as the historical apogee of a universal liberal political ideology regarding gender equality that enables women to become individual rights-bearing subjects. This “feminist universalism ... [rests on the] assumption that feminism must, by definition, incorporate notions of individualism.”²¹ Attempts to ‘globalize’ feminism have often proceeded on the basis of this assumption, animating efforts to take this ‘truth’ of gender essentialism to the global stage. Global feminism has thus often included bringing feminism to oppressed third world women who are victims through ‘evangelism,’ the ‘adjudication’ of which movements and issues are indeed truly ‘feminist,’ and ‘resourcing’ third world women’s lives for the development of theory for consumption in the West.²² The resulting forms of global feminism can be described as a new form of “feminist ethnocentrism”²³ because of their representation of ‘Other’ women and cultures.

Indeed, we might think of these older conversations within global feminism as illuminating the dangers of ‘*speaking for*’ in Rooney’s third narrative, which is “nothing if not an

invitation to a new kind of orientalism.”²⁴ In her first two narratives (‘speaking from’ and ‘speaking as’) the subject and object of feminism merge in the emergent political consciousness of the speaking feminist subject. In contrast, ‘speaking for’ portrays western feminism’s global turn, which represents the trans/forming feminist subjectivity of the object (the proto-feminist nonwestern other) as a replication of, the speaking subjects’ (western feminists’) historical formation, and as initiated by her. Central to this paradigm is the assumption that knowledge flows from the *history* of western feminism (which has already succeeded in bringing about the transformation to a kinder, gentler patriarchy) to inform the *contemporary* struggles of non-western feminists combating their present-day, and relatively more brutal, patriarchies.²⁵ In other words, global feminism utilizes an ‘allochronic discourse,’²⁶ which sees ‘our’ past as ‘their’ present and our present as their future. To restate this in Rooney’s terms, the narrative of global feminism has often been “*I tell your story as the (his) story of my feminism.*” The double entendre in my restatement draws attention to the intertwined aspects global feminism as both an allochronic discourse (*history*), and a patriarchal discourse that is produced by western feminists’ reprise of masculinist objectivist epistemologies which treat other women as objects rather than subjects of knowledge (*his-story*). The differential consciousness expressed in feminisms from the global South draw our attention to this temporal dimension of (western) global feminist discourse. They illuminate the ways in which notions of homogeneous, linear time inform the universalist narrative of the western-as-global-feminism through the constitution of its others as existing in a “contemporaneous before.”²⁷ Critical global feminist discourse opens up a space for recognizing that the ‘now’ of nonwestern feminisms ‘speaks to’ contemporaneous global feminisms rather than following its history.

Western global feminism has also been mainstreamed into and dispersed by the

practices of transnational governance and philanthropic organizations, such as the UN and Ford Foundation among others, which bring discourses on gender that have been formulated elsewhere to non-western countries fully formed, instead of in dialogue with the discursive contexts into which they are being inserted.²⁸ Indian feminists have referred to this phenomenon as ‘donor feminism’ to highlight the power that these organizations have in shaping the transnational flows of knowledge and ideas.²⁹ However, as Spivak notes, to ask for the prohibition of these universalist discourses would amount to an absurd denial of history; instead, she urges us to aim for a “caution, a vigilance, a persistent taking of distance always out of step with total involvement, a desire for permanent perambulation, [which] is all that responsible academic criticism can aspire to.”³⁰

Thus a principal question for us was this: How could we—as U.S.-based academic feminists—enter into this overdetermined field without duplicating its history? In response to this dilemma, we conceptualized our project’s methodology as enabling the writing of postcolonial histories of global *feminisms*. It does not just multiply and complicate the historical archive of various (inter) national feminisms, but endeavors to write these as “histories from the borderlands.”³¹ As feminisms that are coeval to and constitutive of, rather than late arrivals in, global feminism. We adopted material practices of multidirectional and recursive transnational intellectual exchange as a component of this methodology. As a form of cultural critique, this approach enabled us to write against representations that ‘speak for’ non-western feminisms. Being ‘out of step’ also entailed scrutinizing the history and producing an/Other narrative of U.S. feminism, and we did so in the context of an ongoing conversation with non-western colleagues who were producing their own histories of feminism. Acknowledging the past in the present, we sought to create institutional pathways for making U.S.-based feminist scholarship and pedagogy accountable to ‘non-Western’ feminist scholarship and movements. Such dialogue,

we hoped, would work to re-present the production of 'Global' feminisms outside the West, and also illuminate the distinctiveness of these feminisms within this rubric. It shifted our attention to questions enabling this dialogic reframing, such as: How do Indian feminists represent their histories in a global frame? How does Western feminism become 'provincialized' when read alongside and refracted through the histories of its own and other 'Others'? In other words, how can we, to use Urvashi Butalia's words, "reverse the privilege" that Indian feminists had in learning from the history of western feminism? Let's listen to what she had to say:

...many of us at that time, when we were in the university [in the 1970s], read a lot ... and we read actually a lot about the western feminist movement. [...] In study groups and independently, and we individually shared books, you know. So we read people like Sheila Rowbotham, we read ... I can't now remember -- lots of books. We used to just exchange them, because we were poor, we couldn't afford to buy these books. So I think that that gave us a fairly solid grounding. And in a sense I'm always grateful for that, you know. The thing is that the Indian Women's Movement is always accused of being a follower to the western movement ... of being a "poor cousin," a "second cousin." And people say that our movements grew out of the western movements. And I think this is a load of nonsense actually. It's very clear that [...] there are political trajectories, which lead us to where we got to. But I think also that we had the privilege of learning and reading about other movements, from which we learned a great deal. And very often I feel that western movements don't have that ... that privilege in reverse. Because they never thought we had anything to offer. So they never learned from us.

Looked to us ... for... a history?

That's right. Whereas we actually have grown up with that history. You know, so if you were to ask me to look at the differences between radical feminism and reformist

feminism and revolutionary and socialist feminism, I could tell you those. But if you were to ask somebody, you know ... who's been involved in the western movement to look at the influence of Gandhism or Confucianism, or this, that, and the other in our movements, I don't think they would really be able to talk about that. So in that sense I think we were very, very privileged to be growing up at a time which propelled us into women's activism in this way.³²

Narratives of Indian Feminism, 1970s-1980s

Butalia's words help us remember the importance of 'recasting' third world women and feminisms. This was the title of what has become a canonical text in Indian feminist scholarship, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's, *Recasting Women*. First published in India in the late 1980s by Kali for Women Press, it summarized the state of Indian feminist historiography at the time and set a future agenda for feminist scholars in and outside India.³³ The author's wrote from an avowedly activist-academic position. And their starting point was the criticism that colonial rule in India, and its 'liberal ideology' of civilizational progress which was enacted through various legal reforms (of an imagined homogenous indigenous patriarchy), differentially affected women in different "caste-class formations in civil society."³⁴ The editors argued that 'feminism' too was ideological and therefore could not assume either a uniform or universal history of emancipation. Following the lead of this text, Indian feminist scholarship has analyzed patriarchy as thoroughly mediated by caste, class, and colonial ideologies and practices of rule. In today's feminist lexicon, at least within US feminist scholarship, this is glossed under the term 'intersectionality.'³⁵ However, as the Indian women's movement and its history demonstrate, recognizing differences within the category 'woman' has been an ongoing source of productive tension for the movement. Sangari and Vaid's celebrated acknowledgment

of these differences among women has also been subsequently critiqued for its own exclusions, paradoxically apparent in the text's focus on middle class Hindu women.³⁶ This paper—like the work of our project—asks: How might the experiences, words, and forms of address of women's movement activists, feminists, and scholars in India reframe the dialogue on 'difference' in global feminism? Space does not allow for providing a comprehensive history of the IWM here (and many excellent published accounts already exist).³⁷ Rather, my aim is to situate our interviewees into this larger history and, through their words and lives, trace some of the major preoccupations of Indian feminism (IF), the Indian feminism movement (IFM), and Indian feminists.

Scholars have produced a chronology of the Indian women's movement as a history in three "waves."³⁸ Such a teleological chronicle of the women's movement can only proceed by the omission of minor or counter-strains during a given period, by understating its continuities, and by providing exact dates for shifts that are in fact nebulous. Nonetheless, they serve as a useful heuristic to mark periods during which different issues of concern and modalities of political action emerged as the movement matured, gaining a broader democratic base while deepening its reach into civil society. During the first wave, roughly from the 1920s to 1940s, feminist activism was focused on reform movements during colonialism, and the anti-colonial nationalist movement that resulted in India's independence from Britain in 1947.³⁹ The distinction between 'autonomous' women's organizations and those that are affiliated to political parties that emerged in the IWM in the postcolonial period is a legacy of the coordinated activities by political parties of various ideological orientations in the nationalist struggle. This identification with the postcolonial nation-state extended into the second wave, from the 1950s to 1970s, when matters concerning national development in a Gandhian-socialist mold dominated political life and women's movement organizations. The first two waves have also

been referred to as the first women's movement, while the third wave, from the late 1970s through the late 1990s, is referred to as the second women's movement.⁴⁰ During this latter period, there was a widely acknowledged shift in the locus of feminist activism to the streets, when the demonstration culture of the IWM brought feminism into public visibility and discourse. The 1980s are also viewed as a period of building a national movement through alliances and coalitions that were forged among local and regional organizations and campaigns.⁴¹ In what follows, drawing on the life stories of a few activists, I shall attempt a very limited assessment of the 1970s and 1980s. While the 1990s have been witness to pivotal debates regarding questions of differences in Indian feminism, a detailed consideration of this period will not be possible here and is not necessary for my limited purpose of establishing the 'difference' of Indian feminism.

*The 'Daughters of Independence:' Transforming Others*⁴²

The 1950s and 1960s have been called the "lost decades" in the IWM, which have an as-yet "unwritten history."⁴³ Other scholars have noted the "disappearance of the women's question from the public sphere,"⁴⁴ and the lull in political activism on women's issues during the two post-independence decades because of the legitimacy accorded to the postcolonial state.⁴⁵ During the 1950s through the 1970s, feminist activists became deeply engaged in the Nehruvian project of state-led development (named after the vision and stewardship of the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru) that pursued socialist-welfare goals through planned social and economic development within a democratic polity.⁴⁶ Several of our interviewees belong to this generation of feminists. They were born in the 1920s and came of age during the political foment of the 1940s. They spent their formative years amidst their families' political involvement in the nationalist movement, in the context of which middle class women's participation in the public political sphere was acceptable.⁴⁷ For this generation of feminists,

the class privileges of their natal family lives enabled their entry into politics and subsequently, into the women's movement after independence. Their activism began in the 1970s, and many of them elaborated on these first steps as activists in their interviews.

Neera Desai, a renowned Bombay-based women's studies scholar (b.1925), described her mother's involvement in Gandhi's nationalist 'Quit India' movement in Maharashtra in the 1930s. The Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi (b.1926) who is promotes tribal rights in West Bengal is of the same generation. She spoke of her family's involvement in the communist party in West Bengal, and her mother's and grandmother's participation in the independence movement. Notably, Gandhism and communism continue to be influential political ideologies in the women's movement in the present.⁴⁸ Vina Mazumdar (b.1927) is a key figure in the women's movement and the founding of women's studies. She proudly spoke about her father's premature retirement from his job as a civil engineer during colonial rule, because he refused to follow orders from his British superiors to destroy dams in Bengal. Like others of her generation, she recalled shouting '*Stree Swadheenata Zindabad*' [Long live women's freedom], adding "You could say that we grew up with this kind of a feeling about being free in free India and [wanting to be] treated on par with men."⁴⁹ This is in keeping with what Desai said of this era in her interview: "the women's movement was a part of the nationalist struggle ... [there was a] kind of interchange ... between nationalism and ... gender issues."

As was the case with their mothers' generation, the intimate sphere of their natal family life was politicized by nationalism for these activists, who are all, as Desai says of her family, from the "middle class, educated, upper caste."⁵⁰ Similarly, Mazumdar said of her youth, "I have to confess that I wasn't aware of much of the issues beyond those experienced by the middle class *Bhadralok*' [the Bengali educated upper middle class] women in my part of the country. So there was no real consciousness of the women's issue as such."⁵¹ Devi's father was a *swadeshi*

lawyer who represented nationalist activists the independence movement and an “eminent writer.” Her mother also published some of her stories and fought against caste discrimination; even her maternal grandmother, Devi notes, “had her own library.”⁵²

Departing from the normative expectations for women of their generation, their marriages were also somewhat unconventional: Neera Desai talked about her marriage to someone of her own choosing at the age of 20 in the 1940s whom she met through political activism. She also postponed having a child until she was 30 years old so she and her husband could get to know each other better. Mahasweta Devi and Vina Mazumdar did not dwell much on their marriages and pregnancies, but we can glean similar strains of independence from their narratives. Devi conjured a free and unrestricted childhood, and spoke of her independent travels and explorations off the beaten track among the Bhil tribals in West Bengal in her thirties. “I would leave after breakfast, walking, walking, and end somewhere [where there were] plenty of tribal huts ... I would go anywhere, you know. I had this madness in me. I would walk to their houses, be very well received. Sit with them, talk. Often sleep in their houses, then come [back]. I just like, loved it.”⁵³ Mazumdar alluded to her independence when she recounted moving her family from Bengal to Bihar, and then again to Delhi, because of her teaching jobs. In her interview, she recalled what her father said when she asked his permission to look for a teaching job as a single woman: “The country has adopted a new constitution which tells me I cannot discriminate between you and your brothers, and since I have always told them that my job ends with providing them with some education, and after that their life’s decisions must be their own, the same thing applies to you.”⁵⁴

Buoyed by parental support, all three women expressed autonomy around personal questions of marriage, fertility, and work at a stage in their lives when they do not employ the label or language of feminism. Both Desai and Mazumdar engage very specifically with women

in their work through their scholarship, institution building, and in their policy work, although, as Devi notes, there is a prevailing preference among academic women to refer to themselves as “women’s studies researchers” instead of feminists.⁵⁵ Devi adamantly dismisses the notion that she focuses on women in her writing, despite the fact that some of her most famous stories have female protagonists:⁵⁶ “[I]f from my writing feminism oozes out—I have nothing to do with it ...consciously ...I write about the whole of society. About women, of course, men, children, all of them, but ... about such women about whom no one writes ... When I say women, I don’t mean [women] alone ... I don’t leave the middle class and upper class alone though [since abuse] ... goes on there also.”⁵⁷

Most notably, because of their privileged upbringing, in each of these three cases, their entrée into the public sphere of politics and activism occurs through various intellectual engagements: Devi is a writer of fiction, an editor of a popular magazine for which she collects the life stories of tribals and peasants, and the leader of a Harijan Worker’s union; and Desai and Mazumdar are academic scholars and policy researchers. Neera Desai scholarship focused on gender, and she founded the first Women’s Studies center in the country at SNDT university, where she taught, in 1974, and she played an important role in the formation of the Indian Association of Women’s Studies (IAWS) in 1982. Like Vina Mazumdar, she was a member of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (in the Social Task Force).⁵⁸ Working on this committee, which was appointed by the national government, proved to be pivotal in Mazumdar’s academic career, which “radically alter[ed] the direction” of her life.⁵⁹ The committee’s mandate was to “review the extent to which the constitutional provisions [had ... been achieved,”⁶⁰ and Mazumdar played a leading role in co-authoring the path-breaking report of this committee, *Towards Equality*.⁶¹ Hailed as a “founding document” of the IWM, the report was a “starting point not only for women’s studies, but also as a beginning for state feminism in

India.”⁶²

The mid-1970s proved to be a turning point in the public awareness about gender inequality in no small measure because of this publication. Documenting the declining status of women in post-Independent India, the report inaugurated a more critical stance by women’s groups regarding the failures of the state and directed their attention to issues of class, caste, and ethnicity, to urban and rural differences, and to economic and political change; issues that were “coming off the soil.” Mazumdar admits that the committee was “shattered” by the results, which lifted the veil of silence—the “intellectual purdah”—about the majority of women’s lives in India.⁶³

[We heard] around 10,000 women across the country, thus beginning for us an exposure that lasted the length of a year and shattered our *arrogance of learning*. ... [We had to reconcile] the wide contradictions between the perceptions and beliefs of the intelligentsia ... and what we were hearing from women of the soil.⁶⁴

Indeed, in conjuring up the book’s significance for Indian feminism, its impact has been likened to Betty Friedan’s book in the U.S.⁶⁵ The report also simultaneously signifies its difference from US feminism. Unlike Friedan, who spoke as a white, middle-class suburban housewife of the 1950s while claiming to speak about the experiences of all women (“selves ... naming, analyzing, and politicizing selves”),⁶⁶ the *Report* highlighted the inequalities among Indian women. There was a high degree of self-reflexive awareness about the differences among women in the IWM, rather than their erasure under the sign ‘woman.’ As Mazumdar put it, “For the first time, it was about coming to terms with the understanding that we were always a very small minority, not the bulk of India’s women ... I was feeling totally ashamed. I call myself a social scientist. I call myself an educationalist and I did not know any of these [facts]. Why did I not know?”⁶⁷

The committee adopted what Mazumdar terms a “self-denying ordinance” in its

approach to developing local interpretations of these facts for the Report. The committee resolved “that we were not going to look at feminist literature from the West because ours is a fact-finding exercise and we are going to draw the issues from the soil. So nobody read anything coming from the West. This self-denying ordinance, as far as I am concerned, still remains. I don’t think ... and I’m a supporter of [the] International Women’s Movement, and we have participated in all the debates at the international level—but the kind of, you know, imposition of paradigms from the West that we had to fight in the whole development debate, the same kind of imposition is going on today, and that has to be fought.”⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the report gained international recognition and served as a basis for “Third World alliances” and forging ties with the non-aligned movement.⁶⁹

The biographies of Devi, Desai and Mazumdar illustrate how they address the ‘woman question’ in their professional lives through the representation of women whose lives are very different from their own. They act on behalf of, give voice to, and depict the mass of Indian women who are laborers, dalits, peasants, poor, and uneducated. Feminist organizations that were being formed in the mid-seventies, such as *Samtha*, from which the first feminist magazine *Manushi* emerged, and *Stri Shakti Sangathan*, which led the first visible campaigns against dowry deaths and rape in Delhi, also reflected this bias. Urvashi Butalia (b. 1952) and Ruth Vanita (b. 1955) both spoke of their role in co-founding these groups in Delhi, along with other younger feminists and with assistance from Vina Mazumdar.⁷⁰ Reflecting on the women’s movement in that era, Butalia remarked that their approach, while “perhaps appropriate to the time,” had also been “deeply flawed.”

[F]or many women of my class, middle class women who were involved in the movement, the initial entry was [based on the] ... assumption that we were in there to solve the problems of other women. We never questioned ourselves. We never thought,

“Well, what is it that leads us here? What are our own issues, our own problems?” We didn’t talk about those. It was almost a kind of *welfareist* type of approach. ... [S]omehow we all never talked about ourselves. That was taboo. We talked about the other women that we were working with.⁷¹

These life stories illuminate how the Indian middle-class feminist self emerged during the seventies through the representation of other women’s lives. Desai links this predilection and “the consciousness of working for others” to a “nationalist consciousness” that was cultivated in her early years of schooling, an emphasis that was certainly shared by others of her generation.⁷² As is suggested by Mazumdar’s experiences while conducting research for the *Report*, they turned the dominant western mode of feminist empowerment (*‘the personal is political’*) on its head. She asks: “[W]ho is empowering whom? Can we or the State or laws empower all women, particularly all those who still remain victims of poverty, injustice, and violence? Going by my *personal experience*, the long-term partnership with unlettered and poverty-stricken peasant women have *empowered me* to carry on the struggle against inherited inequalities and contemporary forces of disorganization, disorder and social regression.”⁷³

Note that the personal experience that she refers to is not of her own patriarchal oppression, but the experience of ‘listening to’ poor rural women speak about their experiences. This dialogic experience incites her feminist consciousness and empowers her and other feminists to represent the interests of poor, uneducated peasant women to the state and to ‘speak for’ them. Their feminism is thus illustrative of both modalities in Rooney’s third feminist narrative mode—they represent others’ stories through their own feminist politics, speaking for the ordinary Indian woman, but their feminism is simultaneously shaped,

transformed, and energized when they speak to her and hear her stories. Nonetheless, as Butalia notes, they remained blind to the possibility of politicizing their own personal experiences.

Mary John has drawn attention to this ‘split subject’⁷⁴ of Indian feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, though she focuses more on their representational mode (speaking for) rather than the dialogic mode (speaking to) that I am highlighting here: “Indian feminism was formed through an active process of representation, with the need to speak on behalf of the vast majority of the nation’s women.”⁷⁵ Although this view of middle-class feminist ‘welfarism’ is shared by many scholars, other interviewees in our project’s archive demonstrate how this narrative of Indian feminism during the 1970s and early 1980s glosses other subject positions that were being concurrently produced within the movement at the time. The activism of the 1970s, however flawed, also opened up the field of possibilities for the growth of the IWM beyond the middle class,⁷⁶ a trend that drew synergy from mass mobilization and activism in people’s movements, such as the *Chipko* environmental movement, and other peasant and left movements.

“After the ‘70s,” observed Neera Desai, “the movement became very, very loud, in a sense, visible. And there was a lot of visibility in terms of action both in the court of law, in the legislature, and, on the street.” Desai pinpoints two intersecting levels that came together in the 1980s as an explanation for this, the founding of the Indian Association of Women’s Studies in 1981, after which biannual conferences were held, and the conferences of the autonomous women’s movement that began at the same time, which posed the ‘gender question’: “[A]ll these questions were being asked ... at both levels, so there was an all round atmosphere of ... not only discussion, but [of] action going on.”⁷⁷

Other Classed Subjects: Personal Transformations to Feminism

The life histories of two other interviewees, who are from the same generation as Desai,

Devi and Mazumdar, trace rather different routes to public activism on women's issues than those mapped above. Shahjehan Appa (b. 1946), whom we heard from before, is a Muslim woman who was married at the age of fourteen with little formal education beyond religious instruction and the ability to read the Koran in Urdu. She was a stay-at-home mother of nine children until her marriage to her abusive husband fell apart. She left her husband and moved to Delhi, where she took on sewing work at home to raise her children as the sole breadwinner of the family. In the early 1980s, her eldest daughter Noorjehan, who was a factory worker, was subjected to dowry-related violence and harassment by her husband and in-laws, who ultimately burned her to death. Enraged by the police's ineffectiveness in following-up on the murder, Appa mobilized a neighborhood women's group against dowry to protest at the police station. As she recounted this event, she linked her own experience of domestic violence to the 'dowry death' of her daughter in a common frame of violence against women:

Not only did I give birth, but also raised them on my own. Whenever I told my husband that I wanted to go for sterilization, he refused ... I had seven sons and two daughters.

The two younger daughters have been married and the eldest daughter has been killed for dowry. I stepped out of the house because of her. Her death and me feeling shattered ... [Before that] I had worked within the house. But I stepped out to work after my daughters' death. Because at that time I knew about women being tortured at home by men; I thought why should I give in, I had tolerated [it] for many years.⁷⁸

Appa joins the growing anti-dowry movement and campaign against dowry-related violence by women's organizations in Delhi and goes on to co-found a women's shelter, support, and resource centre, *Shakti Shalini* (Women's Power), in 1986. Appa's history is an illustration of how working class activists in Delhi take rather different routes to feminist politics than do educated, middle class women such as Desai and Mazumdar. Appa, who was uneducated but

employed, is transformed by events in her personal life, which lead her to become active in the women's movement in the 1980s. Her story is similar to those of other "grass-roots" activists in the IWM in Delhi at the time, who, it has been observed, "came from uneducated lower-class and lower-caste migrant families ... [and] were initiated into activism by the middle class women"⁷⁹ For these uneducated but economically active activists, "both personal crises of women and economic issues were important in motivating them towards activism."⁸⁰

The biographies of women from rural areas and tribal regions, whose life-histories also differ from those of middle class activists, are likewise overlooked in dominant historical narratives of Indian feminism. Ima Thockhom Ramani Devi (b. 1930) is a member of the *Meiteis* tribe in the northeastern state of Manipur. Along with other states in the region, Manipur is home to several regional tribes which have mounted secessionist movements, and it shares an international border with Myanmar. Its strategic importance and political instability led the government to declare the state a "disturbed" region, and in 1980 it imposed the 'Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958 in the state, which suspends all civil rights and allows the military unchecked powers.⁸¹

Ima has a primary school education and describes going through periods of poverty and the near starvation of her family in the mid-1960s, when there was a severe shortage of rice in the region caused by its export to other regions in the country and abroad. When her husband takes a second wife while she is pregnant with her fourth child, she banishes them from the home that she shares with her in-laws. Her husband returns a few years later, after he separates from his second wife; but we do not learn anything else about him following this event from her narrative. Ima's activism dates back to her mid-30s, when she participated in a state-wide hunger march in 1965, and the formation of the *Nishabandhi* (anti-liquor) movement in the mid-70s. She is also a founding member of the *Meira Paibis* [Torch bearers] movement that was

formed by Manipuri women in 1980 to protest the army's abuses and indiscriminate arrest of boys and men in the area. "With torch light in one hand and a stick in the other hand, we hid in bushes or roamed around ... [W]e took *mairas* [torches] and went around so that they could differentiate between women and men and not harm us in any way ... we started *andolan* [a movement] to repeal the Special Powers Act."⁸²

Ima speaks of the troops' targeting and repression of Manipuri tribals, and in particular of men and boys, who are routinely subjected to violence and mistreatment by the state. The women of *Meira Paibis* place themselves as buffers between the army and their families and, in so doing, openly challenge the state through their peace keeping efforts.

If they arrested people without finding out whether they were guilty or not, we protested, [and] followed the army everywhere with *Meiras* in our hands. The army would walk on the side of the road while we'd go in the middle of the road with *Meiras*. They would ask us, "Ma, where are you all going?" We would say, "We are going for patrolling." And whenever they arrested any youth, we would try to intervene and stop them from arresting without ensuring whether he was innocent or guilty (76)... Like this the *Meira Paibis* went to different areas and the news of our work spread. Thus we were known as the Peace Keepers of the land (77)... They have no respect for the women of Manipur. Though we agitate there is no action from the Government ... *We don't allow men to come out as they are caught and killed*. If we insist, the men would surely come out. Today the number of men is reducing because they are being killed every day. We have more women and we may end up with no men. The army sent by the Government to Manipur to protect us, which is their job, [but] instead of protecting us, they are raping the women (79-80, emphasis added).⁸³

Like Appa, Ima has a trajectory of activism that is at odds with the normative routes of middle-class activists. Ima and Appa's activism comes from their own experiences as women, and their modes of protest are more direct, for they put their bodies on the line in opposition to the state's actions (in the case of Manipur) or inactions (in the case of dowry deaths). For example, Ima participated in the protest organized by *Meira Paibis* in July 2004 at which 12 women stripped in public to protest the army's excesses, which include raping women and, in this instance, also the killing of a woman in custody.⁸⁴ (See FIG. 1, "Women attend to an unconscious Thokchom Ramani after the July 15 protest.") Likewise, Appa participated in many public anti-dowry demonstrations in Delhi in the 1980s. (See FIG. 2, "Shahjehan Appa at an anti-dowry protest with a picture of her daughter, circa 1980") In part this different mode of activism is a reflection of the demonstration culture of feminism in urban areas in the late seventies and early eighties, when Appa enters into feminist politics. For Ima, who has been active in politics since the 1960s, the exceptionalism of tribal identities and regions that is produced by the state effects a different interpellation of gendered social bodies into the public sphere. Because of these ethnic identifications, 'gender' occupies a less central location in the political activism of Manipuri women: "The *Meitei* women of *Meira Paibis* are little concerned with women's rights by themselves, and believe that they must get general civil rights implemented first... The tendency to dismiss women's rights is also likely due to the *Meitei* culture, which prides itself on the traditionally high status and prominent role of its women in society."⁸⁵ This decentering of women's rights by tribal women notwithstanding, the alcohol prohibition movement from which this movement evolved was centered on the experiences of women who suffered domestic violence and poverty because of their husbands' alcoholism.

Despite being from the same generation, Appa and Ima are less alike than they are different from Mazumdar, Desai, and Mahesweta Devi. They are from less privileged

backgrounds, and have relatively little education beyond primary school. And they come to gender politics through issues that intimately and materially affect members of their working class and tribal communities, including themselves, with little or no support from their families. These regional, class, ethnic, and political differences between women of the same generation who *entered* the movement at different periods during the third wave, points to the incipient broadening of its base towards in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The resultant class tensions and biases of the IWM in this period can be seen most clearly when women from less advantaged backgrounds enter into this arena as activists.

For example, in the late 1970s, Mumbai based feminist legal scholar and activist Flavia Agnes (b. 1947), was in an abusive marriage but unable to leave her husband because of her, and her children's, financial dependence on him. She recalls being the only person who was not educated or a professional in the Bombay-based group, the 'Forum Against Rape,' which was formed in response to the rape of a 14 year old tribal girl by two policemen. The group led this important anti-rape campaign —known as the 'Mathura rape' case—to gaining national prominence in the late 1970s. This case was a turning point for the IWM, as it marked the beginning of coordinated national activism and campaigns in the movement, and the focus on violence against women which was "one of the first issues taken up by women's groups in India"⁸⁶ Flavia was nervous about how to introduce herself to other members at the Forum's meetings, who all had careers and job titles. Encouraged by an old-time activist and academic, Rohini Hensman, who introduced herself as a "housewife," Flavia seized the label to describe herself during the groups' cursory self-introductions. Her experience of the Forum as a presumptive middle-class space extended to its members' silence regarding the issue of monetary support for her travels to research the Mathura case and interview the victim, and in

their assumption that she was the more appropriate person to do this 'activist' work because of her background:

When I was going to Turbe, I want to tell you that every time I went, I spent my own money. Nobody asked me. Every time people said, "Flavia will go." Nobody asked me how I was going ... Also, in the Women's Movement I felt I was reduced to the level of activist because I had not studied. Because all the people who were telling me [that] education is not important were all doing their PhDs. So there was one friend with whom I had stayed for a short time who told me that, "You know Flavia, everybody tells you [that] education is not important ... Don't take it seriously or [think that it's] okay if you have not studied." She said, "Don't trust them. Because they all come from a particular social class; they are all doing their PhDs and you will be at the level of SSC [Senior Cambridge, a high school-level diploma]."

Because she was the only person among the group who knew Kannada, the language spoken by the rape victim and her community, Flavia became the 'anchor person' for the investigation and the Forum's representation of the case. Drawing on her experience of domestic abuse enabled her to better understand the rape victim, "because," she noted, "I used to speak to her. Not only speak to her but somewhere connect, you know, the oppression of my individual life to what is happening to this girl."⁸⁷ Reflecting on the powerful effect that her involvement in the campaign had on politicizing her personal life and marriage, she said, "everybody's life must have changed, but nobody's life changed as radically ... I was very new for theory. I mean, like, for me theory was practice."⁸⁸ Transformed by her participation in this campaign and in feminist conferences that were being held during that period, she left her abusive husband and eventually went back to school for an undergraduate degree and further training as a lawyer.

This narrative of *personal transformation*, where the personal becomes political through their direct experience and reflexive awareness of their exploitation as women, is a common theme in Appa, Ima and Flavia's narratives. Whether their feminist subjectivity emerges as a consequence of their participation in movement campaigns, as in the case of Flavia, or personal events lead them to become active in the women's movement, as in the case of Appa and Ima, it is this personal experience that produces their identification with feminist principles, even though they experience the women's movement as relative outsiders because of their class, religious, regional and ethnic backgrounds. In this sense they evince a 'gapped identification' with the subjects of feminism, for they want and aspire to join the movement, even as they recognize their difference within it. Although all three are either separated or spend considerable time away from their husbands, they do not counter-identify with men. On the contrary, as Appa notes, they count on men as allies in the movement and, in the case of Ima, even direct their activism towards the protection of men from excesses of the state. Despite their differences in these respects from Desai, Mazumdar and Devi; like them, they also evince a split subjectivity as they occupy two subject positions simultaneously —*speaking from* locations beside feminism and *speaking as* women who have suffered because of their classed and ethnic gender identities.

Difference in, and the Difference of, Indian Feminism

Women's participation in feminist activism and the IWM during the 1970s and 1980s produced divergent feminist subjectivities. Autonomous women's groups were formed during this period by professional women from the urban, educated middle and upper classes. Although these organizations were created as autonomous from political parties, many of the women who founded them were also members of these organizations—they were self consciously feminist and from the 'far left'.⁸⁹ Class and caste oppression was an issue that was

theoretically and experientially salient to their feminism. This meant that their own experiences were not the focus of transformative feminist politics, which were directed instead at “women’s uplift,”⁹⁰ or the betterment of the lives of rural, poor and working women.⁹¹ I have suggested that these feminist subjects speak for the mass of Indian women, while their activism and politics are shaped in dialogue with them. Indian feminism, from its very inception, was shaped by the necessity to speak across differences.

Popular movements that arose in the 1970s—such as the environmental Chipko movement, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), and the anti-price rise movement—had wide support and also successfully mobilized peasant and working class women into activism.⁹² The formation of *Meira Paibis* by Ima and other Manipuri women in 1980 came out of this kind of popular, mass mobilization of women. Likewise, the founding of resource centers and advocacy groups a decade later by and for women who had experienced various forms of patriarchal oppression—*Shakti Shalini* by Appa in 1987, *Majlis* by Flavia in 1990—tended to address issues of violence against women, such as dowry, rape, domestic abuse, and women’s rights, which were at the forefront of the movement in the 1980s. As organizations with a defined structure, fixed office locations, and a trained staff that provide a range of outreach services, these groups differed substantially from the local campaign groups that characterized the late seventies, when the spread in the women’s movement occurred largely in response to specific issues and local situations.⁹³ By the late 1980s, such ‘grassroots’ women’s organizations and activists formed a third and separate stream of women’s movement organizations, along with autonomous and politically affiliated groups in Delhi.⁹⁴

Although my focus has been on particular individuals, the biographies of these women represent larger historical shifts in the IWM. Their different modes of identification with feminism produced distinct subject locations and subjectivities. This is reflected in the

multivalent foci of the movement, enabling dense points of contact between the women's movement and other social movements. The IWM, notes Radha Kumar, "is perhaps the only movement today which encompasses and links such issues as work, wages, organization, environment, ecology, civil rights, sex, violence, representation, caste, class, allocation of basic resources, consumer rights, methods of production, health, religion, community, individual and social relationships etc."⁹⁵ In striking similarity to the history of U.S. third world feminism, the 'politics of representation' of erstwhile Indian middle class movement activists is not replaced by the 'politics of identity' of grassroots activists but continues alongside it.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the split subjectivities of speaking for/to and speaking from/as do not characterize autonomous subject positions but are historically and rhetorically *relational*,⁹⁷ reflected in the prevalent and ongoing coalitional and collaborative work in the movement. It is not until the 1990s, when religious, communal, and nationalist politics posed serious challenges to feminist and other progressive social movements, that we see the emergence of minority women as oppositional subjects of mainstream Indian feminism. Flavia Agnes' public disidentification with the upper-caste Hindu culture of the movement illustrates this shift when she claimed: "The norm was mainstream Hindu academician. And I was the other—the minority the Christian, activist woman."⁹⁸

This essay began with the claim that the national landscapes of feminism shape their particular universals. The history of difference in Indian feminism points to a narrative enunciation of its feminist subjects that can now be stated as follows: '*We tell our story as the history of our feminisms.*' Reconfiguring the dominant U.S. Western feminist narrative—*I tell my story as the story of my feminism*'—Indian feminists replace the individual subject "I" and "you" with a collective subject of feminism that draws on its roots in and continued form as a multifarious

social movement which shares common ground with other social movements. The split subjects of Indian feminism refuse the postmodern dissolution of politics from collective movements to identity politics and individual subversions. Their continuous practice of ‘talking to’ each other across differences within the movement has produced relational subjectivities that enable working through the difficult politics of coalitions which are ethically accountable to new articulations and meanings of prevailing differences that emerge at crucial historical junctures.

Note the openness of the ‘we’ in this narrative re-statement of feminism. Instead of ‘me’ or ‘I’ and ‘you’ or ‘your’—which maintains a clear-cut distinction between the feminist subject and the object of feminism—they suggest that global feminisms can and should aim for a shifting ground between the two; for the inclusion of both into the more capacious collective subject “us” and “our.” This enunciation: *‘We (Indian feminists) tell our story as the story of our (Indian feminists’) feminism,’* may also be stated as: *‘We (Indian feminists) tell our story as the story of our (global feminists’) feminism.’* The shifting ground between these two connotations of ‘our’ articulates the collective subject of feminisms in different communities and multiple patriarchies⁹⁹ within the nation, while also accounting for the movement of historical knowledge and praxis from the west to the rest in that history. It also enables a reversal of this historical privilege from the rest to the west. But it does not replace it. To do so would be to reproduce the essentialist universalism of past global feminisms with one grounded in the transcendent specialness of a non-western, ‘third world’ feminism. Instead, it unravels the temporal and geographic boundedness of the ‘global’ in feminism so that it no longer functions as a proxy for the west.

Indian feminists belie the presumption that they are latecomers to global feminism, and hence following in the footsteps of their western sisters, as is suggested by the narrative construction *‘I tell your story as the (his)story of my feminism.’* The recognition that “different

societies produced different feminisms” was important in the Indian context where feminisms itself was being dismissed as ‘Western’ and hence irrelevant to that context.¹⁰⁰ Thus, while Indian feminists distanced themselves from Western feminism in order to make a space for themselves within India, they correspondingly rejected the idea of feminism as Western. Instead, “[w]hat is being claimed here is a kind of universalism, of which, Western feminism is one stream and Indian feminism another.”¹⁰¹

Figure 1.

‘Women attend to an unconscious Thokchom Ramani after the July 15 protest.’ Photo by G. Leishangthem. Figure caption and source from *The Telegraph*, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1040725/asp/look/story_3533201.asp#.



Figure 2. Shahjehan Appa at an anti-dowry protest with a picture of her daughter, circa 1980 (Source: Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 137; © Sheba Chacchi, permission pending).



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¹ Mary E John, "Women and Feminism in China and India: A Conversation with Li Xiaojiang," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40 (April 15, 2005), 1594-1597. Li Xiaojiang was one of the Chinese interviewees of the Global Feminisms Project.

² Inderpal Grewal, and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1-36.

³ Dipesh Chakravarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000), 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵ Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Formations of Modernity*, eds. Stuart Hall and B. Gieben (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 275-331.

⁶ Mary John has herself written against such simple dualisms that belie the complex reality of Indian and American feminisms. See: Mary E. John, *Discrepant Locations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

⁷ Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991), 1-24.

⁸ Ellen Rooney, "What's the Story? Feminist Theory, Narrative, Address," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 8 (Spring 1996), 1 (30). General OneFile. Gale. University of Michigan - Ann Arbor. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=ITOF>, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 288-300.

¹⁴ Rooney, "What's the Story," 7.

¹⁵ Kumar, *History of Doing*, 195.

¹⁶ Rooney, *What's the Story*, 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Rooney sees Spivak's work as exemplary of this narrative. See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-316.

¹⁹ Alarcón, *Theoretical Subject(s)*, 279.

²⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* XII (1984), 333-58; Aihwa Ong, "Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-Presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies," *Inscriptions* 3/4 (1988): 79-93; Spivak, *Can The Subaltern Speak?*

²¹ Lois West, "Feminist Nationalist Social Movements: Beyond Universalism and Towards a Gendered Cultural Relativism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 15, no. 5/6 (1992), 563.

²² Margaret Urban Walker, "Global Feminism: What's the Question?," *Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 94 (1994), 53-54; on the appropriation and resourcing of U.S. women of color's texts, see also Alarcon, "Theoretical Subjects."

²³ Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), cited in Ellen Rooney, 'What's the Story?' See also Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes' and Ong, 'Colonialism and Modernity.'

²⁴ Ellen Rooney, "What's the Story?"

²⁵ See, for example, Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783-90.

²⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Constitutes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

²⁷ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 184.

²⁸ See for example, Sally Baden, and Anne Marie Goetz, "Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourses on Gender at Beijing," *Feminist Review* 56 (1997), 3-25.

²⁹ See Mary John, "Feminism in India and the West: Recasting a Relationship," in *Feminism in India*, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005), p.66, n.2.

³⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 362.

³¹ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera, the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Sandra Harding, "Reinventing Ourselves as Other: More New Agents of History and Knowledge," in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 268-95; and "Borderlands Epistemologies," in *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

³² GFPCST, 13. [All references are to the University of Michigan's global feminisms' project (GFP) and interviews will be referenced by the page numbers of country-transcripts available online at globalfeminisms@umich.edu as follows: India interview transcripts (GFPIIT) and cross-site interview transcripts (GFPCST).

³³ Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986). It was published in the U.S. in 1990 by Rutgers University Press.

³⁴ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, "Recasting Women: An Introduction," In *Recasting Women*, 1.

³⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), 1241-1299. Patricia Hill Collins spoke of a 'matrix of domination' to refer to the same idea in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1990), 262. See also Cole and Luna, this issue.

³⁶ Mary John, *Discrepant Locations*, 136-7.

³⁷ See, for example, Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992); Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993); Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," in *Subaltern Studies IX*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 232-60; essays in Nivedita Menon, ed. *Gender and Politics in India*. New Delhi: (Oxford University Press, 1999); and Maitrayee Chaudhuri, ed. *Feminism in India*, (Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004).

³⁸ See, for example, Gandhi and Shah, "Rhythms of a Movement," in *Issues at Stake*, 15-35; and Nivedita Menon, "Introduction," in *Gender and Politics*, 1-36.

³⁹ Geraldine H. Forbes, "Caged Tigers: 'First Wave' Feminists in India " *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (1982), 525-536.

⁴⁰ Samita Sen, "Towards a Feminist Politics: the Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective in India," in *The Violence Of Development: The Politics Of Identity, Gender And Social Inequalities*, ed. Karin Kapadia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002), 481; 514-15.

⁴¹ Agnihotri and Mazumdar, *Women's Movement in India*, 229.

⁴² I borrow this label from Liddle and Rai, who use the term more generally than I do here to refer to the women of post-independent India. Joanna Liddle, and Rama Josh, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste, and Class in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women; London: Zed Books 1986).

⁴³ Indu Agnihotri, and Vina Mazumdar, "The Women's Movement in India: Emergence of a New Perspective," in Ray and Basu, *From Independence Towards Freedom*, 226.

⁴⁴ Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," in *Feminism in India*, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005), xvii.

⁴⁵ Menon, *Gender and Politics in India*, 18.

⁴⁶ Nivedita Menon, "Women and Citizenship," in *The Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998), 241-266.

⁴⁷ Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, 2006), 100

⁴⁸ Lakshmi Lingam, "Taking Stock: Women's Movement and the State," *The Indian Journal of Social Work* 59 (1998), 167-190.

⁴⁹ Global Feminisms Project's India Transcripts (hereafter GFPIT), 194, and 186.

⁵⁰ GFPIT, 50; Thapar-Björkert, *Women in the Indian National Movement*, 170-216.

⁵¹ Ibid., 186.

⁵² Ibid., 87.

⁵³ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁵⁵ Neera Desai, "The Making of a Feminist," *Indian Journal of Women's Studies* 2 (1995), 250. More recently, Madhu Kishwar has also rejected the label because of its western connotations. See her: "A Horror of 'Isms': Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist," in *Off the Beaten Track: Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 268-290.

⁵⁶ See especially, 'Breast Giver' and 'Draupadi,' in Mahasweta Devi, and Gayatri Spivak, *Mahasweta Devi Breast Stories* Translated by Gayatri Spivak (Calcutta: Seagull Books Pvt. Ltd, 1997).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 103-4.

⁵⁸ Desai, Making of a Feminist, 249.

⁵⁹ Vina Mazumdar, "Whose Past, Whose History, Whose Tradition? Indigenizing Women's Studies in India," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 7 (2001), 136.

⁶⁰ GFPIT, 188.

⁶¹ Committee for the Status of Women in India (CSWI), *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee for the Status of Women in India* (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974).

⁶² Shirin Rai, "Emerging State Feminism in India: A Conversation with Vina Mazumdar, Member Secretary to the First Committee on the Status of Women in India," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9 (2007), 109. See also the statement on the role of the document in the founding of the IAWS at <http://www.iaws.org/menu.html>.

⁶³ GFPIT, 172.

⁶⁴ Mazumdar, Whose Past, 141-2.

⁶⁵ Susie Tharu, and K Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India : 600 B.C. To the Present. Volume II: The Twentieth Century*. (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1993), 101, n.94.

⁶⁶ John, *Discrepant Dislocations*, 126.

⁶⁷ Rai, *Emerging State Feminism*, 106.

⁶⁸ GFPIT, 191.

⁶⁹ GFPIT, 193.

⁷⁰ GFPCST, 12.

⁷¹ GFPCST, 14, emphasis added.

⁷² GFPIT, 51.

⁷³ Mazumdar, Whose History, 152-3, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ John, *Discrepant Locations*, 126.

⁷⁵ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁷⁶ For an elaboration of the Bourdieusian construct of 'fields' in Indian feminism, see Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women Press, 2000).

⁷⁷ GFPIT, 64-5.

⁷⁸ GFPIT, 8.

⁷⁹ Nilika Mehrotra, "Perceiving Feminism: Some Local Responses," *Sociological Bulletin* 51 (2002), 75. The author uses the term 'grass-roots' which, for lack of a better term, I have adopted.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ The act "empowers the non-commissioned officers of the armed forces to arrest without warrant, to destroy any structure that may be hiding absconders without any verification, to

conduct search and seizure without warrant and to shoot even to the causing of death.” The Asian Centre for Human Rights, “An analysis of Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958,” *PUCL Bulletin*, March 2005, <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Law/2005/afspa.htm>.

⁸² GFPIT, 74, 76, and 79.

⁸³ GFPIT, 76, 77, and 79-80.

⁸⁴ See GFPIT, 80; and Khelen Thokchom, ‘She Stoops to Conquer,’ *The Telegraph*, Sunday, July 25, 2004, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1040725/asp/look/story_3533201.asp#.

⁸⁵ L. Anna Pinto, a member of the Imphal-based NGO, Centre for Organisation, Research and Education (CORE), quoted in Thokchom, ‘She Stoops to Conquer.’

⁸⁶ GFPCST, 14.

⁸⁷ GFPIT, 35.

⁸⁸ GFPIT, 34-35.

⁸⁹ Kumar, *History of Doing*, 106.

⁹⁰ Tharu and Lalita, *Women’s Writing*, Vol.II, 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Gandhi and Shah, *Issues at Stake*, 22; and Kumar, *History of Doing*, 102-3.

⁹³ Mazumdar and Aghinotri, *The Women’s Movement in India*, 1999: 228-9; GFPIT, 37-39.

⁹⁴ Mehrotra, ‘Perceiving Feminism,’ 64-5.

⁹⁵ Radha Kumar, *History of Doing*, 195.

⁹⁶ Sandoval, U.S. Third World Feminism.

⁹⁷ Alarcón, Theoretical Subject(s).

⁹⁸ GFPIT, 41.

⁹⁹ Kum-Kum Sangari, “Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies (Part 1)” *Economic and Political Weekly* 23 December (1995a), 3287- 3310; and (Part 2)” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 December (1995b), 3381-3389.

¹⁰⁰ Radha Kumar, *History of Doing*, 195.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*