

## WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND AUTONOMY

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Representation in both the senses of the word- i.e., culturally as a construct shaping, and conditioned by, social historical cognitive modes and politically as a standing for and protecting the interests of a constituency is central to and discussion of leadership. My discussion of the modes of subjectification of the female leader was intended to mark the strategies of representation that certain texts of the culture resort to in their attempt to reconcile femaleness and authority.

Representation in the second sense that democratic politics enforces where the one stands for and protects the interests of the many in the nation's legislative and executive bodies- is also a concept that is rendered problematic in the case of women leaders. Often women leaders adopt a tough even ruthless and authoritarian political style that effectively pre-empts any possible identification or partisanship on their part with women as a sex or as a group. Women leaders' sharp disjunction from the collectivity of the women of their nation, in terms of both status and solidarity, highlights their unrepresentatives. The divorce must be viewed, further, in the context of the overall inconspicuousness of women in political activity precisely in those countries that have been led by women. As, a recent workshop on women and politics' organised by UNESCO and UNIFEM reported: "Neither the late Indira Gandhi nor Mrs. Corazon Aquino's leadership roled have influenced women lower down the line women remain on the periphery of the spheres of power and influence and even in terms of awareness, party membership, contesting elections, voting or deliberate abstention from voting and decision making, woman's participation has been unimpressive."

The report suggests that womem voters do not necessarily cast and female vote at election time: instead 'votes are shaped by the factors of caste, class and ethnicity.' Given this failure of representation at all levels women leaders can be accommodated within feminist theoratical and political models only with diffculty. But the reasons why the mutual disowning of women leaders and feminism can not be simply left at that, as a matter of separate and unrelated areas, need to be briefly discussed.

What we wish to develop here is an analogy between the woman leader and the woman writer, and explore to problematic of the one viz. the other as a means of illuminating the first a relatively little considered issue in feminist thinking through reference to the second, an area of considerable feminist theoratical investment. The

historical, i.e., actual, 'woman leader, like the individual woman writer, admittedly does not radically unsettle the question of women's political power or of women's writing, as the case may be, simply by virtue of existing. But once, we concede that women's access to political power is important for a feminist politics then the recovery of the subjectivity of the leader from the premise that gender significantly constitutes it can begin, simultaneously with the enquiry into the relevance of gender to the activity in question.

Jacqueline Rose's capsule history and perceptive analysis of feminism literature in the easy, the institution of feminism,' will serve as my guide through the territory. Rose locates the beginnings of the women's movement in the critique of representations of women in literature, a critique based upon the recognition that representation is a crucial area of women's oppression and liberation. There is a similar recognition, as we have tried to show, particularly in women's movements in third world countries, that political representation for women, i.e. their participation in political decision making, is essential for the effective attainment of women's rights, which accompanies the recognition that most social and political structures repudiate women in power or view them negatively. Rose locates the next step of feminist literary critical endeavours in the 'focus on women writers as a counter-history to the dominant literary paradigms are preferences', which also meant 'opening up literature to the wider arena of sexual inequality'. Similarly, feminist political theory remarks upon the exclusion of women from the political process, especially from leadership. Identifies women leaders and their modes of access to and exercise of authority, and calls into question the evaluative criteria by which leadership is judged. The dangers that Rose perceives in the second move, namely, the co-operation of the woman writer within the literary institution and the consequent 'marginalisation of the question of gender and sexuality', are implicit in political practices as well. Thus any affirmative discourse risks reinscribing itself back into the terms of the literary as such.'

The individual woman writer may therefore be acclaimed both from a feminist as well as mainstream perspective but for different and even opposed reasons.

Rose refuses to grant that the transition from the critique of male discourse to the attention to women's writing in feminist criticism is a progression, though it is certainly a logical next step. Affirmation is a politically complex move for several reasons: the danger, already noted, of the cooperation of women's writing leadership within the mainstream of the institution, the frequently reactionary content of women's writing, the result of a regrettable internalisation of a patriarchal norm; and finally feminism's uncertainty over whether participation in the literary as such or in political power can be claimed by women when it is simultaneously criticised from a feminist perspective as a politically suspect, i.e. hegemonic or dominant activity. The simple valorisation of women writers, or women's writing, is not as it can not be the central preoccupation of feminist theory.

But affirmation as a political project that considers a difference of political voice to be at stake leads to the idea of a 'female aesthetic'. This aesthetic can take the form either of the assertion of a liberal conception of selfhood, or of the undoing, disintegration or negation of sexual and linguistic identity as such. There are similar and equivalent processes to be observed in a political theory that privileges women's leadership as a difference of political voice, where the first position corresponds to the celebration of the achievement of power and rank by women, and the embrace of a specifically feminine mode of power that deconstructs the dominant paradigm of sexual differences. Rose warns of the possibility of the rarefication of this position its becoming "another version of the aesthetic of modernist high prose", as earlier we noted the danger of feminists embracing radical alterity is a posture that might become ultimately politically disempowering.

The difficult negotiations that feminism must enter into with the literary make possible its major interventionary thrusts into the situation of women. These are identified by Rose as first, 'that wider redefinition of the literary which brings it into connection with other cultural forms as well as with other modes of historical and political critique' relating to race, class and sexual differences; and second the articulation between subjectivity, language and institution which feminist criticism brings to bear upon the 'domain of fantasy and the vicissitudes of psycho-sexual life'. It should be similarly possible for a feminist political theory to broaden the scope of its enquiry to *include* the historical, cultural and social dimensions of the structures and institutions of political power. Just as the problem of women's exclusion from writing is not a problem that can be resolved by 'simply encouraging more women to vote. The question of representation in both cases 'exceeds the liberal notion of equal access to rights. Rather, the problem requires a return to a form of critique but this time to the examination of the forms of libidinal investment and mastery through which individual and collective identifications are secured and upon which they come to rely for holding representational images in place. We would ask: What are the points of connection between a sexual imaginary and the accredited forms of collective discourse and speech? Rose argues that it is the intractability of these unspoken scenarios which makes other forms of transformation often so difficult to bring about.' Our ongoing section on representations of women in power in the contemporary Indian culture was an attempt to identify such a collective discourse and speech on female authority, though without having resources to the specific psychoanalytical procedures that Rose advocates.

Rose rounds off her discussion- fortuitously, for our purpose- with an investigation into the psychic investment in the image of the woman impelled by the re-election of Margaret Thatcher for a third term at the time of her writing of the essay: 'It is another instance where the importance of the image, whose particular force feminism has always recognized, leads outside the literary and educational institutional, passing this time into the general reaches of the public fantasy life. The construction of women in terms of recognition roles, images models, and labels occurs in discourse in response to specific

social imperatives even where it may be offered in terms of the universal and abstract rhetoric of 'Woman' or 'Women'.

In the handful of texts, we cite in the section-picked at random from a survey of contemporary culture- the representation of the relative freedom of women is encoded neither as an absence of conflict, nor as the resolution of conflict, but as the product of a specific conjuncture of social and historical circumstances. Thus, Saoli Mitra's one-woman entirely realistic, but in poses the problems of rural society, the dilemmas of the men who migrate and they loneliness of the women who are left behind, the question of the double standard, the proposition that women must exercise their rights over their own 'bodies, in terms both of desire and of reproduction, and the possibility of a female solidarity based on shared oppression and sympathy, in an idiom that is forth right and powerful.

Finally, I cite, *We Were Making History* by members of Stree Shakti Sanghatan in Hyderabad. These stories constitute an invaluable oral history; these are the spoken reminiscences of about twenty women who had been part of the peasant struggle against feudal oppression, bonded labour, exploitation, rape- in rural Andhra Pradesh in th 1940s. The editors and other members of the Women's organisation, Stree Shakti Sanghatana, who perform this task of recording, collecting, editing and publishing these stories, aslo speak of the problems and dangers of ceding them as transparent accounts of events and feelings; 'As anyone actullay engaged in recording life histories find out neither memory nor experience is exempt from ideological processing... hidden conventions and models shape the fiction through which we grasp and project our lives.'<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the overwhelming impression the book creates is one of liberation, a new optimism and a sense of participation in the stirring larger events of history that for women cannot but be emancipatory in the modest sense.

Several of these texts Kanthapura<sup>6</sup> describe the period of women's collective struggles as a 'magic time'. These periods are not fortuitous conjectures of the woman and the movement but contingent events grounded in specific historical and social circumstances. K. Lalitha and Vasantha Kannabiran offer the analysis that 'it is only in period of social dysfunction with the breakdown of constant surveillance and the mechanisms of discipline that normally objectivity them, that women rush forth to grasp the opportunities for response and growth that become possible.?' Though, the women who participated in the Telangana movement talk with 'nostalgia and warmth' of the best period of their lives, the contradications of their experience are sharply drawn riot only in terms of its inherent strains and conflicts but of its temporal limits. As in the nationalist movement, when the struggle is called off, the aspects of identity that many third world women leaders have embraced, as daughters, wives, widows, or mothers, gender is an inevitable component. It is invested with considerable affect.

In contrast to the popular, even mythic, appeal of this early commercial film's representation of 'Mother India' there are many more specific critiques of Indira's prime ministership in the post-emergency period. We shall consider briefly her two fictional representations of a group of stories that the author has described as allegories of power which are explicitly concerned with power, terror, occasioned by India's brief experience of emergency. The story begins with the curse visited on an unnamed or many years by the Lady, widowed sovereign, who remains immured and hidden in her fortress. Her Foetus, immaculately conceived, sets out from her womb in the darkness to hunt, kill, rape and brutalise the villagers. Only the village Priest and the Astrologer are able to withstand its power. The Foetus commands a following of young scions of the gentry, and these are joined by other foetuses produced by the Foetus's rape of the village women. As the Foetus grows in power, successively subduing the insurrectionist, the village school and rebellious fleeing peasants, the Priest and the Astrologer decide to invoke the love of the Devi by chanting the prayer litany to her. The Foetus is then persuaded to return to the womb and be born as a child. But both mother and son die in the childbirth, and the village is finally delivered into freedom.

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