DECOLONIZING THE HOME
AT HOME IN THE PANDEMIC:
ARTICULATING WOMEN’S
EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Feminism bears the promise of liberation of and equality for women. Reading and teaching feminist texts, within the academia and in activist spaces, has provided the opportunity to explore what it means to become and be a woman. This article explores the experience of teaching a course on women’s writing at the undergraduate level during the COVID-19 pandemic. Normally, a course on feminist writings is an occasion for self-reflection, thereby providing an opportunity to establish a dialogue between the domestic and the public. Such dialogues took place in secure institutional spaces such as classrooms or conference halls, without the intrusion of the domestic. However, as the teacher–student interaction shifted to an online mode during the pandemic, all the participants in this dialogue, including the instructor and the students, found themselves in domestic spaces, with family members listening. The article chronicles the anxieties of a woman instructor, as she teaches feminist texts from home to learners who are sitting behind computer screen in their homes and the possible impact of feminist ideas on the domestic spaces of all participants.

Classrooms have possessed the radical potential of allowing an instructor to discuss liberatory possibilities. Since the promise of higher education in countries like India has been to realize egalitarian possibilities, which are embodied in a progressive Constitution, an instructor has had some freedom and autonomy in a formal classroom setting in order to produce critiques of traditional societies. However, this physical space of a classroom became a casualty of COVID-19 in early 2020, as teaching and learning shifted to online mode. Both instructors and learners found themselves continuing with their activities from domestic spaces, with family members being witnesses. This domestic space had not witnessed formal learning activities and radical discussion so far. It hadn’t had to deal with intruding world views, which might have a disruptive effect on domestic equations. This sudden and unexpected

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shift has prompted the instructor to become conscious of the impact of teaching liberatory feminist ideas from home; such impact is visible both in the domestic space of both the instructor and the learner. This article is a preliminary attempt to document the impact of teaching feminist writers and their ideas on the personal life of the faculty and the student. It further considers the possibility of decolonizing the domestic space from its patriarchal moorings.

Through two case studies, one conducted pre-pandemic and the other during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic, at a private university located in Bangalore, a cosmopolitan metropolis in South India, this article brings forth pedagogical complexities of teaching issues such as equity and gender. It seeks to contrast the physical classroom setting with the online mode in which both the instructor and the learner find themselves in domestic spaces, shared with other family members. Given that the domestic space is still governed largely by traditional patriarchal family values, the safety one felt in the classroom is simply not available. Moreover, online classes can be and often are recorded, sometimes by the universities themselves, which lends the classroom deliberations to be potentially used for non-academic, political ends. Such complexities haven’t been adequately acknowledged. Using my own experience along with discussions with numerous colleagues and students from different institutions, I have tried to recognize the altered pedagogical contexts due to the COVID-19 pandemic and explore other pedagogical possibilities, which are in accordance with my own feminist aspirations. Nonetheless the domestic setting of lockdown teaching has meant that any discussion of liberation politics has to be done and it is this awareness which has guided my own pedagogical practice over the past 18 months.

Teaching Feminism in India

Aparna Rayaprol and Maitrayee Chaudhuri discuss the challenges of teaching courses on women and society in an Indian classroom. They show this contrasting reality of safely discussing gender and patriarchy inside the classroom while experiencing the reality of eve teasing and discrimination the moment one steps outside the classroom. Both Rayaprol and Chaudhuri emphasize a sense of helplessness (many of us) feel when feminism remains an intellectual discourse between the four walls of the classroom. Sara Ahmed suggests a solution to this quandary when she argues that feminism should become ‘homework’, ‘...[F]eminism is homework because we have much to work

1 Aparna Rayaprol, ‘Teaching Gender in Indian Universities: Reflections on Feminist Pedagogies’, Sociological Bulletin, 60 (1), January—April (2011), pp. 65–78; Maitrayee Chaudhuri, ‘Learning through Teaching the “Sociology of Gender”’, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 9 (2002), pp. 245–61.
out from not being at home in a world. In other words, homework is work on as well as at our homes. We do housework. Feminist housework. Feminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild the master’s residence. Ahmed recognizes the work that feminism needs to do not just in the outside world but in the domestic space, a need which has been more acutely felt during the pandemic. Periodic lockdowns have exacerbated family tensions, since the majority of people are confined to small spaces with limited or no access to the outside world. The case studies below will trace my teaching experience, specifically the evolving complexities of delivering ‘content’ and a reduced, or perhaps even compromised, ability to use the classroom for ‘teachable moments’.

I would like to begin with some reflections on the public and private self of a woman instructor teaching in a private university in Bangalore. My context for this reflection is an undergraduate classroom where I taught feminist texts under two different courses: the first course entitled, ‘Articulating Woman’, was clearly defined as a feminist course and taught on campus in a physical classroom three years ago and the second was an undergraduate general course, which was taught online between June and October 2020. This second course wasn’t a decidedly feminist course but did include selections from women writers. I will limit my discussion to these two courses, which were taught under very different circumstances, to underscore how feminism seems to be able to engage with women’s identity only in the public arena. Ideally, feminist engagement should also be able to reach domestic and community contexts as well.

My first case study, ‘Articulating Woman’, is an advanced elective course. It focuses on the question of women’s agency, their autonomous capacity to produce their self-images as opposed to those authored by patriarchal society. The course design, selection of texts, and pedagogy were informed by a need to engage with essentialist patriarchal notions of women and to contest traditional conceptions of womanhood. Hence, the course included women writers from India, America, Britain, Africa, and Australia. Innumerable conversations with colleagues and students guided my choice of authors. By the end of the course, I was confident that students would be able to think critically about the social reality of women and would engage in efforts to change such a reality. To achieve this goal, I included works which contained incipient forms of resistance to patriarchy.

The other course titled ‘Additional English’ and taught online in 2020, is a mandatory general course, offered to first year undergraduate students, who may be studying disciplines in sciences, social sciences and humanities or

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2 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 7.
3 Radhika Govinda et al., *Doing Feminisms in the Academy Identity, Institutional Pedagogy and Critical Classrooms in India and the UK* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2020), p. 227.
management. The objective of the course was to introduce important contemporary Indian writers who write in English to students. By including radical thinkers and writers, we tried to inculcate critical thinking skills among students, which would help them to re-examine their own beliefs and practices. Not surprisingly, the course contained selections from literary works which dealt with gender, caste, secularism, and democracy. My particular online section had students from sciences and performing arts. Our interaction was limited to the virtual classroom space and although I have a general sense of the student demographic of my university, it was quite unnerving to teach a group of students one had never met, especially when the subject matter included a critique of one’s own society.

**Confronting Feminism in the Classroom**

‘Articulating Woman’ offered a genealogy of feminist discourse—suffrage; control over body; professional opportunities for women; and finally, intersectionality of all the three waves of feminism. However, my own experiences in the university campus made me realize I had perhaps offered a linear, flat account of feminism and made my students think that the world has transformed itself to accommodate the aspirations of women. One particular incident stands out. Walking towards the department, I saw a boy staring at me. Later, I was told that he was the boyfriend of one of the girls who was in my class. I also came to know that other boyfriends had tried to dissuade their girlfriends from taking my course. Our classroom discussions were being transmitted to the outside world, particularly into the personal spaces of my young students. Many of them had to take a firm stance, which affected their personal lives. As a feminist instructor, it was important for me to also address the instinctive threat boyfriends felt and help my students to imagine their futures with conviction and confidence. Therefore, I began discussing feminism, its impact on everyday life and the courage required to sustain a feminist life. My pedagogical methods were carefully crafted to confront the vulnerability of both men and women with emotional intelligence rather than aggression. Examples came from my own feminist journey, everyday negotiations with personal and professional conflicts. It was a deliberate choice to offer personal vulnerability for scrutiny from students. Such choices helped to create a safe space for students to share their experiences and struggles involved in making ethical and ideological choices.4

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4 Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Ming-Yeh Lee narrate the limitations of vulnerable position of a feminist faculty in a multicultural and multiracial classroom situation in their article: ‘Women of Color in the Academy: Where’s Our Authority in the Classroom?’, Feminist Teacher, 15, (2), (2005), pp. 111–12.
Negotiating Feminism in the Virtual World during COVID-19

The lockdown, however, changed the pedagogical spaces significantly. To explain this point, I will share my experience of teaching the poem, ‘Forest Fire’. Its author, Kamala Das, is very critical of conventional family life and the patriarchal expectations imposed on the woman. The poem itself is simultaneously an expression against restrictive patriarchy and the impact of the restrictions on women’s ability to experience life. Das argues that it is important to approach every experience without censorship. She does not allow herself to be limited, either as a woman or as a poet. Hence, the poem uses the image of fire to indicate the consuming passion and heightened desire to reach the inner self. Such unbridled response to life demands imagining a woman outside the set boundaries of societal expectations.

Discussion of such a poem in a physical classroom has its tense moments. However, the formality of the classroom setting, with a clear sense of the behaviour expected by both the instructor and the learner, creates a professional, restrained atmosphere for discussion. Even the formal conventions of the university aid in the creation of such an atmosphere, which isn’t easy to recreate in an online setting. While discussing the poem ‘Forest Fire’, in an online class, a male student expressed his opinion in a very derogatory manner. The student interpreted the poem as an expression of a woman’s sexual frustration only and not as an aspiration for unhindered creative expression. I was more bothered by his language than his opinion. Sitting at home and away from the professional setting of the university, the student seemed to be emboldened like the millions of online trolls.

I taught ‘Forest Fire’ from the dining table in my apartment. I live in a four-bedroom apartment with my husband and daughter. My daughter occupies the study for her online classes and my husband has converted the guest room as his office. The dining table, opposite the kitchen, is where I teach from. It is public enough, so that everyone in the family can hear my lectures and classroom interactions. The dining table, which was till now a ‘family space’ to talk about our day, begins to witness intellectual, academic, and feminist readings of texts and social reality. Therefore, if new silences emerge at home, I am compelled to recollect everything I may have said in the ‘class’ which I taught from my dining table. I have had to become more aware of the domestic spaces occupied by both the instructor and learner.

I tried to respond carefully to my student, partly conscious of this new virtual classroom context. Despite these circumstances, I still considered this opportunity

5 Kamala Das, ‘Forest Fire’, Summer in Calcutta (New Delhi: RPaul, 1964), p. 51.
6 Kamala Das, (1934–2009) is a significant Indian woman poet. She wrote in Malayalam and in English. Das wrote openly about female sexuality and the experiences of being a woman.
as a ‘teachable moment’. Therefore, I opted not to confront my male students openly but I suggested that we read feminismsinindia.com and other such online resources as an asynchronous classroom activity and then continue the discussion in the class. I had begun to consider the possible repercussions of espousing feminist values at my home and that of the learner’s. Perhaps that may make my feminist credentials somewhat suspect. Yet I began thinking that other women instructors will have surely experienced such anxieties, and for them thanks to the online teaching mode, these anxieties will become a major preoccupation. Such anxious moments also show the importance of decolonizing feminist thought because the anxieties I narrate above are not necessarily felt in mainstream feminism.

Why Should Feminism Be Decolonized?

It is long time since feminism ceased to be a prescriptive, Eurocentric liberatory practice. Across the world, there have been demands for a plural feminist thought which accommodates multiple female experiences and enriches feminist knowledge production. Even as this process unfolds in higher education institutions, decolonial feminist scholars have been increasingly calling for robust structural, intellectual, and pedagogical introspection within those institutions. Such introspection will push the boundaries of feminist project to identify the continued presence of Eurocentric perspectives and the unacknowledged presence of other women. Emerging feminist classrooms will have to capture and act on such nuanced demands of contemporary feminist movement, both within the classroom and in the social world.

Yuderkys Espinosa Minoso attributes two processes to decolonial feminism. One is to recover the histories and question the image of women presented in Black Feminism, feminism of colour, postcolonial feminism, French materialist feminism, and post-structural feminism; the second process is to offer a decolonized feminism which cannot be constructed as a unified concept. Such a decolonial feminism will argue for a future that will not end with

7 Radhika Govinda and others, Doing Feminisms in the Academy: Identity, Institutional Pedagogy and Critical Classrooms in India and the UK (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2020), p. 227.
8 Sandy Grande. ‘Whitestream Feminism and the Colonialist Project: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Pedagogy and Praxis’, Educational Theory 53 (3), (2003), pp. 329–46; Sharmila Rege. ‘Feminist Pedagogy and Sociology for Emancipation of India’, Sociological Bulletin, 44 (2) (1995), pp. 223–39.
9 Chandra Mohanty, Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003); bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (New York & London: Routledge, 1994); Radhika Govinda and others, Doing Feminisms in the Academy Identity, Institutional Pedagogy and Critical Classrooms in India and the UK (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2020).
10 Yuderkys Espinosa Muñoso, ‘Why We Need Decolonial Feminism: Differentiation and Co-Constitutional Domination in Western Modernity’, Afterall, 1 July 2020 <https://
reaching the European approach of modernist, developmental model as salvation; instead, it offers a radical trajectory that will defy all unifying efforts to create an image of an essential woman and accentuate the difference in terms of race, ethnicity, caste, and material condition.

Informed by decolonial feminist aspiration, I simultaneously think about teaching feminism online, its impact on my familial relationships and the circumstances in which my students attend my class. Are they alone in a private space? Are they using a personal device or sharing it with other family members? Will other family members listen to my online sessions? How should I treat this new non-classroom classroom—a semi-public and semi-private space where our remarks can also be taped and released into the digital public space? How should I navigate such a space? These questions take on an independent life because the feminist pedagogy that I practice is not, ‘...merely processing received knowledges (however critically one does this) but also actively transforming knowledges. In addition, it involves taking responsibility for the material effects of these very pedagogical practices on students.’11

The experience of teaching from home actually makes clear how powerful the physical space of the classroom can be, as a shared space of self-discovery: for myself as well as the students. Classrooms have been liberating spaces to think about, to discuss feminist concerns, where I can take on uncompromising intellectual positions with assurance. bell hooks effectively describes the difference between liberating education and the conformation expected by the domestic while attending school reserved for Black Americans as a young child: ‘School was the place of ecstasy-pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else’s image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas, re-invent myself.’12

Classrooms create similar ecstatic, dangerous spaces for me. It is not that the domestic space is very rigid or orthodox; however, my family members are not introduced to my progressive ideological convictions. While my ability to manage domestic and professional responsibilities is not relevant, the impact of my feminist convictions on my family members is a concern. Espousing values such as social justice, gender equality, secularism in a traditional Indian family setting is a challenge these days for any instructor—male

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11 Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 201.
12 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p. 3.
or female. But a female instructor faces additional demands: her public self, academic conviction, intellectual vigour, economic independence makes her appear as the epitome of feminist success story. Her domestic self, which might not be lived according to the feminist notions, is not visible to the external world. Such contradictions are seldom discussed openly in India. Thus, feminist ideas will have a theoretical existence and personal context simultaneously. When a female instructor’s public and private selves find expression in a domestic space, it aligns with bell hooks’ description of the contrast between education as a liberating force and the private self-conforming to the expectations of the others. Every theoretical idea heard by a family member is potentially a comment on a family matter.

In the contemporary reality, it isn’t easy to adapt my teaching. Staring at an empty zoom screen, as my students will have turned off their cameras, I am not sure whether there is a mother or a sibling who has lost her job or is facing domestic violence listening into the class. Even as we discuss female empowerment and equality, I cannot stop wondering about the lived experience of the learner amidst both COVID-19 and the ‘shadow pandemic’, as UN Women described the situation of women across the globe. Screens displaying only panels with names hide the psychological emotional impact of both the outside world and our own discussions on the student. While negotiating the ironies of personal and professional life, the instructor has to keep recognizing these new layers of experience and complexity.

The distance between personal and professional space (that was) available in non-pandemic times allowed women instructors and students to wear a mask of professionalism in the University. One could discuss women writers and identity politics, question systemic discrimination dispassionately and with conviction even though the personal life of the participants did not match the theoretical view. Now, as the personal and professional spaces merged, lived experiences do not lose their immediacy. This has led to the emergence of new questions: should we remain content if the decolonizing project remains an academic project? If online mode continues and if instructors are teaching from domestic spaces, should the pedagogy of feminism change?

Decolonial Feminist Pedagogy, Where Next?
As the virtual teaching practice accentuates and blurs the difference between the domestic, social, and institutional spaces as potential sites for bringing about change, the idea that the ‘personal is political’ cannot simply remain a

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13 ‘The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID 19’, UN Women, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19> [accessed 2 July 2021].
consciousness-raising slogan or merely allude to the necessity of introducing intersectional aspects of caste, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and body-type to classroom discussions. An ideal feminist classroom celebrates co-creation of knowledge through the exchange of experiences, removal of hierarchy and creation of a safe space for constructing and narrating a self. As the physical classroom of the university campus disappears, both teachers and learners have to create such spaces for themselves. In these new virtual teaching interactions, anonymity — often celebrated as a feature of the digital world — too isn’t available. Moreover, the physical distance impinges on our collective desire to make learning a transformative experience. While Ahmed’s call is urgent and imperative, realizing feminism as ‘homework’ remains a distant aspiration.

Even as we debate such issues, consider the following facts. In my state, Karnataka, child marriages have increased and domestic violence rose by 44.5% in 2020.¹⁴ Feminism has often dealt with systemic structures which have marginalized women, suppressed their experiences and its articulation in mainstream literary and intellectual traditions. While feminism has learnt to recognize the plurality of women’s experiences and the structures of oppression — its solutions have been to provide representation or protection to women in public and professional spaces. As we examine women’s experience during the altered professional and domestic lives of the pandemic, we need to recognize new challenges which have emerged. Such new compulsions are not very new however and they do resonate with some past experiences. While charting the future course of feminism, bell hooks points out the significance of disseminating the feminist knowledge stored in books to other women who may not have the privilege to access that knowledge and also engage with the everyday life.¹⁵ To accommodate hooks’ notion of feminism is to acknowledge the previous efforts feminism has charted against oppression and recognize the domains feminism should enter, specifically the domestic space.

¹⁴ Payal Seth, ‘Decoding the Extent to Which Domestic Violence Is Under-Reported in India’, The Wire, 12 February 2021, <https://thewire.in/women/domestic-violence-india-underreported> [accessed 19 June 2021]; Akshaya Krishnakumar and Shankey Verma, ‘Understanding Domestic Violence in India During COVID-19: A Routine Activity Approach’, Asian Journal of Criminology, 16 (2021), pp. 19–35.

¹⁵ bell hooks, ‘Future Feminist Movements’, Off Our Backs, 20 (2), (1990), p. 9.