

***FEMINIST SOCIAL SCIENCE LITERATURE: THE QUESTIONS OF FEMINIST
EPISTEMOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE***

Prof. Dr. Maja Muhić
ORCID # 0000-0001-9483-8071
Faculty of Languages, Cultures, and Communications
Department of English Language, South East European University, Tetovo and Skopje,
m.muhic@seeu.edu.mk
Republic of North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring feminist social science literature and the issues revolving around the standpoint theory, and situated knowledge. Standpoint theory holds significant importance in feminist scholarship as it challenges traditional mainly men's perspectives, by emphasizing the influence of social position and identity on one's understanding of the world. Developed within feminist scholarship, standpoint theory argues that individuals situated in marginalized or oppressed positions (this being often women across cultures) possess unique insights into societal structures and power dynamics. While addressing some of the major debates in the area, the focus of this paper is to look critically at the plausibility of the feminist epistemology and the problem of objectivity, brought from the debates in standpoint theory. Objective knowledge also presupposed a unified concept of a woman or some kind of female experience, which has been questioned by the more constructivist scholars like Haraway (1991). The aim of the paper is to tackle some of the implications arising out of science, realism, objectivism, and relativism filtered through the prism of feminist social science literary production. While it appears that the endeavour for objectivity in knowledge is a necessary basis for rendering a feminist political undertaking meaningful, a careful analysis of some of the scholarly works on objectivity may prove somewhat dangerous to feminism in general as it might deconstruct the concept of a woman and female experience all together. Agreeing that the efforts and contributions of feminists in the area of epistemology are crucial in challenging traditional epistemological frameworks that have often marginalized or ignored the perspectives and experiences of women, this paper aims to critically reassess the attempts for preserving or building new doctrines of objectivity, and the potential consequences of such attempts for feminism itself.

Keywords: feminist epistemology, objectivity, social science, standpoint theory, situated knowledge

INTRODUCTION: STANDPOINT THEORY AND OBJECTIVITY REVISITED

Standpoint theory asserts that women, particularly those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, offer perspectives that expose hidden hierarchies and provide a more nuanced understanding of gender relations. By recognizing and valuing diverse standpoints, feminism becomes more inclusive and capable of addressing the complex interplay of privilege and oppression, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and equitable feminist discourse. Standpoint theory also challenges traditional notions of objectivity by asserting that one's social position and identity significantly influence one's perspective on reality. Daston (1992) argues, the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' were characteristic of scholastic philosophy where they signified something different from what they do now, that is, these terms were imbued with much more ontological rather than epistemological flavour (p. 600). Feminist epistemology, being a collective of viewpoints and endeavours for eradicating sexual and gender inequality, built itself around various issues, one of the major ones being the standard conceptions of scientific objectivity shaped by ideals of masculinity. Hence, the feminist epistemology embarked upon reassessing the subject and situatedness of knowledge, as well as the issue of objectivity. The major focus of feminist revolt has been Cartesian dualism and the certainty of reason, which he maintained was purified and disembodied. This radical disavowal of the body brought to the fore the purified subject which was "a masculine and white European subject" (Longino 1999, p. 332). In addition, the Cartesian dualistic system triggered off the emergence of a set of gendered dichotomies (male/female, subject/object, culture/nature) in which each half is in opposition, defined by what the other is not and hence, unequal. Feminism's major endeavour was to reaffirm the epistemological importance of the body and the situatedness of knowledge, thus refuting Cartesian dualism as something which seriously underestimated and neglected significant aspects of cognitive experience. It was this new emphasis on the embodiment of knowledge that brought into being standpoint epistemology, which focused on the analysis of the situatedness of knowledge and the possibility of attaining objectivity.

Feminist standpoint theory starts from the Marxist premise that the socially oppressed class can access knowledge unavailable to the socially privileged, particularly knowledge of social relations. A prominent representative of feminist standpoint theory is Hartsock (1998) whose main point of departure is Marxism, sexual division of labour, and childbearing. Hartsock posits that material life has a deep impact on the structuring of social relations, and as Hekman, correctly observes, according to this pattern "it follows that reality will be perceived differently as material situations differ" (Hekman 1997, p. 343). Moreover, the dominant group will promote its perspective into a 'real' one, thus rejecting any other standpoints. It is this viewpoint built upon the premises of class struggle and tensions that Hartsock finds so upsetting, and hence she claims that contrary to the perspective of the ruling class, which is partial and perverse, the perspective of the oppressed is the 'real' and thus a liberatory one. Hartsock is prone to believing that "a specifically feminist historical materialism might enable us to lay bare the laws of tendency which constitute the structure of patriarchy" (1998, p.105). She maintains that the standpoint of marginalised groups, that is, women, provides a unique viewpoint from which to begin theorizing. Hartsock believes that it is sexual division of labour that provides the grounds for a standpoint. This stems from the very structures, which define women's activities within the framework of being contributors to subsistence as well as production and reproduction processes. Building on Marx's understanding of the world from the standpoint of the proletariat, which helped him go beneath bourgeois ideology, Hartsock argues that a feminist standpoint "can allow us to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations" (1998, p. 107). Hartsock is critical of Marxist understanding of women's paid and unpaid labour and sees the uniqueness of women's perspective in the very fact that, "the female experience in bearing and rearing children involves a unity of mind and body more profound than is possible in the worker's instrumental activity" (1998, p.116). She accentuates the different activities that produce different worldviews, that is, "the feminist standpoint is something achieved, not given" and only through the feminist analysis can the feminist standpoint be articulated (Hekman 1997, p.346).

This, as Hekman lucidly observes in her critical analysis of Hartsock, comes down to the fact that although the feminist standpoint is constituted solely on discursive practices, the materiality of women's lives on which it is based is not. Hence, it may be said that Hartsock represents the stream in feminist standpoint theory, which embarks upon preserving the political strength of feminist theory, while accommodating difference. This appears to be a brave and challenging attempt in as much as the major criticism of feminist standpoint theory was its inability to accommodate difference and women's heterogeneity by its very promotion of the objective standpoint of women. The very fact that the refutation of a somewhat essentialised and largely monolithic category of 'woman' renders women and feminist politics vacuous is highly alarming for Hartsock. This urges her to preserve the concept of difference among women, yet reject the postmodernist pessimistic claims about the impossibility of any systematic knowledge. In this sense, Hartsock's quest for objectivity and unbiased perspective that, as she envisages, stems from the marginalised and oppressed groups and that as such, can lead to liberation, deserves full justification and should be read as an attempt to preserve the force and importance of the feminist politics project that is so necessary for any social change. Nevertheless, as Hekman rightly observes in her analysis of Hartsock's more recent work *Rethinking Modernism*, she fails in her argument in as much as she argues that "although women are not a unitary group, white, ruling-class, Eurocentric men are" (Hekman 1997, p.352). Hence, it may be said that while Hartsock triggers off extremely sensitive issues, her emphasis on the privileged, unbiased, and therefore objective perspective of the marginalised groups stands on shaky grounds. Hekman notices that Hartsock has correctly approached these complex issues, but that in her very eagerness to place objectivity within one group, she failed to acknowledge the fact that "no perspective/standpoint is epistemologically privileged" (Hekman 1997, p. 351).

Building on the problems of difference, standpoint, and objectivity, Harding proposes a somewhat different approach aimed at furnishing a space for achieving 'strong objectivity'. In her path breaking *Science Question in Feminism* (1986) Harding chooses as a target of her critique three main approaches to the science question in feminism. Namely, she criticises feminist empiricism for seeing the core of the problem rooted only in 'bad science'. Furthermore, Harding criticizes the unified, homogenous category of feminist standpoint approach, since it privileges only the perspective of women and posits a strong masculine bias in science. Her view converges with the one of Hartsock in as much as she herself is also critical of the postmodern approach, which denies all basic scientific assumptions about objectivity and truth. Harding (1998) is also very critical of the relativist notion of all knowledge, thus aiming to gather feminist, postmodern, and post-colonial critiques of modern science. She does this by arguing for reconstruction of the notion of objectivity while refuting the option of total relativism. Harding argues against the ideal of neutrality and maintains that "the neutrality ideal provides no resistance to the production of systematically distorted results of research" (1998, p.132). It is her strong conviction that neutrality can become part of the problem, and that objectivity can often be used to defend and legitimates various distortive practices and their exploitative consequences. It is in this sense that she attacks any form of aperspectival objectivity free from values, and calls for a democratisation of knowledge and a redefinition of objectivity, that is, "one that enables scientific projects to escape containment by the values, interests, discursive resources, and ways of organising the production of knowledge" (1998, p.133).

She believes that the greatest objectivity may be achieved only by incorporating as many different standpoints as possible. Harding's insistence on the incorporation of a variety of standpoints presupposes that one can assume standpoints that are not related to one's experience and material situation (Longino 1999, p.339). This reduction of the importance and role of experience in one's epistemology renders Harding's argumentation as well as the basis of standpoint theory somewhat loose. Furthermore, her ambitiously argued case for achieving 'strong objectivity' leads her into the sphere of realism. Harding declares that "the best knowledge claims should be true of the world in the sense of reflecting without distortion the way the world is, of corresponding to a reality that is 'out there' and unchanged by human study of it" (1998, pp.143-144). Her argument

becomes more problematic if one takes into account her assumption that the incorporation of a variety of standpoints produced by position of oppression will actually produce the final ‘strong objectivity’ and that there can be such a thing as an objective, complete description of the world ‘out there’.

1. COLLAPSING BOUNDARIES AND DICHOTOIMIES THROUGH THE CYBORG METAPHOR AND AGENTIAL REALISM

The problems arising in both Hartsock and Harding attempts to find objectivity in the epistemology of marginalised groups or in the incorporation of a variety of standpoints, are well dealt with in Haraway’s (1991) path breaking discussion of situated knowledge, women’s experience in the 20th century. She sets out to argue that scientific practice is much more constructivist than assumed. According to her “the form in science is the artefactual-social rhetoric of crafting the world into effective objects” (Haraway 1991, p.185). Haraway strongly objects to any form of scientific realism, which naïvely stated, posits that: “The picture which science gives us of the world is a true one, faithful in its details, and the entities postulated in science really exist: the advances of science are discoveries, not inventions” (Van Fraassen 1980, p. 7). This rather stereotypical view of natural science, current until the early decades of the twentieth century, and still firmly entrenched in the popular imagination today, is a claim for science as the rational norm, the epitome of reason. It is to say that the knowledge it reveals is cumulative and is evolving towards a final truth. That it is deductive, precise, unified and therefore capable of reduction. On this view, science is supposedly independent of historical and cultural influences and operates according to a strictly objective rationale and in relation to The Truth, a truth founded on a sharp distinction between observation and theory (Hacking 1983, p. 5). Every aspect of this position has been roundly criticised in recent decades and all but abandoned in this unqualified and over-confident form. Experience shows us that every scientific theory is ‘born refuted’, it never corresponds perfectly with The Truth and is subject to a constant process of revision and sometimes, even, revolution, which makes Haraway’s case even stronger. Haraway is critical of both Hartsock’s humanistic Marxism approach and Harding’s feminist empiricism, criticising them for their insistence on a legitimate meaning of objectivity, “which remains leery of a radical constructivism conjugated with semiology and narratology” (Haraway 1991, p. 187). It is Haraway’s strongest ambition to argue that feminists must insist on a better account of the world, which will not merely show the historical contingency and modes of construction in everything. She is not satisfied with simply theorising the world, but rather accentuates the need to see the radical multiplicity of local knowledges and the importance of earth-wide network of connections, which transcend the binary dichotomies so innate to the Western stream of thought. She puts forward her strong conviction that “feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (1991, p. 188).

It is the notion of embodied objectivity, and of us as technologically situated subjects that Haraway sets out to argue in favour of. She builds her doctrine of objectivity by referring to vision, claiming that all vision is embodied and that vision is anything but passive and detached. The view from nowhere, that is, the infinite vision, is for Haraway merely an illusion, a god-trick. It is rather interesting how Haraway argues that “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (1991, p.190). Her position emanates from her desire to imbue feminist concepts with responsibility. Haraway stands uneasy at the notion of a neutral, view-from-nowhere objectivity that would be free from the notion of responsibility. She observes and powerfully criticises the approaches proposed by Hartsock, Harding, and others who claimed objectivity for the vantage points of the subjugated. Her dedication to the absolute situatedness of knowledge and, hence its partiality urges her to caution against “romanticising and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions” (1991, p. 191).

While it appears more than logical to say that claiming absolute situatedness of knowledge actually is tantamount to relativism rather than objectivism as Haraway would like to claim, she wants to transcend all boundaries and dichotomies, thus critically pointing out that relativism is actually yet another totalising category, which denies location, embodiment, and partial perspective. Her urge to go beyond the relativism/universalism, nature/culture, human/nonhuman dichotomy forms the core of her argument. She believes that any search for a ‘full’ and total position “is the search for a fetishised perfect subject of oppositional history” (1991, p. 193). Situatedness and positioning also bring about the notion of responsibility that figures prominently in Haraway’s ethics. The blurring of boundaries between the dichotomies, human/non-human being the most prominent one, comes alive through her concept of the cyborg. The cyborg, that “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1991, p. 149) is so blurred and undefined, a knot of nature, culture, and technology, that responsibility is rendered meaningless as it loses its own firmly established object. Her claim that there really is no single feminist standpoint does justice to the phenomenon of difference, but risks bringing into questions the very meaning and foundation of feminism. If knowledge is always and everywhere located, embodied and partial, are there really any firm grounds from which to claim objectivity? Moreover, the very framework of technoscience assumes that knowledge spreads, and travels, which makes it even more difficult to pinpoint its particular locatedness from which it presumably generated in the first place. Feminism depends on certain categories regardless of all endeavours to go beyond them, that is, to avoid essentialism. In this sense, Haraway’s claim of utter situatedness of knowledge does not answer the question of why that knowledge would be exclusively related to feminist objectivity. Her strength nevertheless, lies in her attempt to underline the agency of the object of knowledge, which she believes is “an active, meaning-generating axis of the apparatus of bodily production” (1991, p. 200). Her endeavour to preserve the notion of some world or nature ‘out there’ proves the importance of some categories and concepts regardless of the fact that Haraway herself is very well aware of the deep cross-hybridisation of culture, nature, technoscience, humans, non-humans, and nature as a “coyote, a figure for the always problematic, always potent tie of meanings and bodies” (1991, p. 201).

The same attempt to reconcile realism and constructivism was proposed by Barad (1999) and her new concept of agential realism. Her dissatisfaction from the realism-constructivism tension leads her to call on “an approach that recognises the power-laden distinctions drawn between subject and object, nature and culture, human and nonhuman, and examine their consequences” (Barad 1999, p. 2). Barad disagrees with the assumption of an innocent, symmetrical form of interaction between knower and known, and proposes an alternative that she refers to as *agential realism*. This, according to Barad “is an epistemological and ontological framework that provides an understanding of science as ‘material-discursive’ practices” (1999, p. 2). She builds her argument on the work of the physicist Bohr and comes up with the term *intra-action* as a way of signifying the boundness, that is, inseparability of objects and agencies of observation. Similarly, to Haraway, Barad is critical of the realism/constructivism dichotomy and proposes a new unfixed ontology, which is independent of human practices and yet “continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions” (p. 7). By doing this, Barad dissociates herself from a realism that presupposes human-independent reality, and brings into play the immense importance of our intra-action with the world, whereby we sediment reality out of making the world intelligible through certain practices. This leads Barad to introduce the notion of responsibility both for the knowledge that we seek for and for what exists.

One should applaud Barad’s contribution to the reformulation of the traditional notion of causality, which leads her to argue for the existence of a material-discourse agency in humans, nonhumans, cyborgs and the like. Nevertheless, she does not accept the notion of a pre-given agency as an attribute of either the ‘subject’ or ‘object’, but rather locates its emergence in the very process of intra-acting between the knower and the known. She does aim at reaffirming materiality, and her effort to retain responsibility and preserve agency remains highly valuable. She is convinced that agential realism emerges out of the feminist intervention in the

debates between realists and social constructivists. Seeing agency and agential realism as enactment and intra-action within the world rather than interpretation of an independent reality deserves full attention, yet it remains somewhat questionable, where such an approach leaves feminism. While it may be true that both Haraway and Barad use the language and methods of feminism to argue their case, their final conclusions do not correspond much with any 'classical' notion of feminism, as they do for some new concepts of 'cyborgism' and 'agential realism'.

In addition, the discussed views built around the notion of objectivity tend to obscure something that regardless of the numerous attempts for refutation, remains unavoidable, and that is the individual perspective that can never be fully abandoned. Antony (1996), for instance, as a representative of the co-called methodological individualism observes that the individual is the primary epistemic subject, that is, epistemologically basic. This observation can be illuminating for all the aforementioned cases, as it seriously takes into account the inevitability of one's own perspective. Intra-actions, cross-hybridisation, reconciliation, and transcendence of dichotomies and boundaries, all appear deeply insightful, but their weight decreases if one accepts the assumption that it is difficult, if not impossible to leave one's own, individual epistemological framework. It is in this sense, that the feminist call for reflexivity rather than objectivity about one's own assumptions and partiality of knowledge appears highly valuable, if not one of the very few solutions to the intricate convulsion of knowledge, power, and hierarchy in the relationship between knower and known.

2. CONCLUSION

The questions arising from the discussion of feminist epistemology tackled the concepts of feminist standpoint theory, the notion of objectivity, and the complexity of issues that are triggered off within the framework of such a discussion. The views of two prominent standpoint theorists, Hartsock and Harding, were critically presented and compared with those of Haraway and Barad. The major concepts appearing throughout the aforementioned works are those of situatedness of knowledge, its partiality, and objectivity. Objectivity has been understood in various ways ranging from an unbiased and liberating viewpoint of the marginalised groups (Hartsock), interaction of as many different perspectives as possible (Harding), to embodiments and partiality of knowledge as the only basis for claiming objectivity. It was stressed nevertheless, that the concept of individuality, that is, the assumption that the individual as the epistemic basis, and the difficulties, if not impossibilities, of leavening one's own epistemic framework, should constantly be revoked in any further epistemological theorising. In this sense, the notion of reflexivity over one's own beliefs and assumptions should gain even more weight.

However, Haraway's and accordingly Barad's emphasis on situatedness, intra-action blurred boundaries between the dichotomies such as human/nonhuman, culture/society proves somewhat problematic for feminism in general. The value of these theories in their emphasis on the activity of the object and its agency, as well as the importance of perpetual interventions, consequences and most of all responsibilities of intra-action within the world are very important. Yet such claims, and especially Haraway's concept of the cyborg that emerges in this high-tech culture, and as a hybrid of culture and society, human and machine, is supposed to challenge dualism, brings into question the concept of a 'woman,' which remains crucial to feminism and feminist epistemology. Paradoxically enough, even the doctrine of objectivity in knowledge can be problematic for feminism, in as much as it does not require any substantial distinction between male and female epistemology, perspective or standpoint. Nevertheless, feminist standpoint theory in its more classical sense in which it assumes a particular view point of women as somewhat different than that of men, tends to assume a certain more essentialist thesis in as much as it reduces the primacy, that is, exclusivity of social criterion. While criticised for not accommodating difference and heterogeneity of women's perspectives, a standpoint theory that introduces the factor of constant difference in the perceptive, cognitive, that is,

epistemological capacity of women and men is the only way to preserve the importance of feminism, and its highly important political project.

The importance of experience must also be recalled. To this end, it is insightful to point to Fisher's (1999) insight into the importance of aligning feminism and phenomenology. The importance of such an alliance would manifest itself in the “effort to articulate the lived subjective experience”, that is, “to describe women's experience, the experience of being a woman in a society organised around systems of gender hierarchy and preference” (Fisher 1999, p. 70). Moreover, she aims to show that regardless of all the differences among women, there is *a woman's situation*, something that we all experience and are therefore “experiencing *something* similar” (1999, p. 72). At the same time, as she argues, emphasising women's situations acknowledges the fact that they are different without necessarily invoking essentialism. While standpoint theory has tried hard to rework these problems and to accommodate difference, the initial critique that it imposes generalisation, homogenisation and accordingly marginalisation of women is not so substantive after all. Feminism might find it useful, if not necessary, to not only reaffirm the concept of ‘woman’, but to also go back to the roots of standpoint theory, and instead of seeing it as a generalisation of otherwise rich and diverse women’s epistemologies, to possibly trace in it the potential for *majorisation* and *favorisation* of women’s faculties.

References:

- Antony, L. (1996). Sisters, Please, I'd rather do it myself: A Defense of Individualism in Feminist Epistemology. *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 59-94.
- Barad, K. (1999). Agential Realism: Feminist Interventions in Understanding Scientific Practices. In *The Science Studies Reader*.(Ed.) M. Biagioli. London and New York: Routledge.
- Daston, L. (1992). Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective. *Social Studies of Science* 22 (4) 597-6718.
- Fisher, L. (1999). Sexual Difference, Phenomenology, and Alterity. *Philosophy Today* (Supplement) 43: 68–75.
- Hacking, I. (1983). *Representing and Intervening*. Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books.
- Harding, S. (1998). Recovering Epistemological Resources: Strong Objectivity. In her *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Epistemologies*. Bloomington&Indianapolis: IndianaUniversity Press.
- Hartsock, N. (1998). The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism. In her *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.
- Hekman, S. (1997). Truth and Method: Standpoint theory Revisited. *Signs* 22: 341-365.
- Longino, H. (1999). Feminist Epistemology. In *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*. (Eds.) J. Greco and E. Sosa. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Van Fraassen, B. (1980). *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: OxfordUniversity Press.