



Feminist Research

Homepage: www.gathacognition.com/journal/gcj2
<http://dx.doi.org/10.21523/gcj2>



Book Review

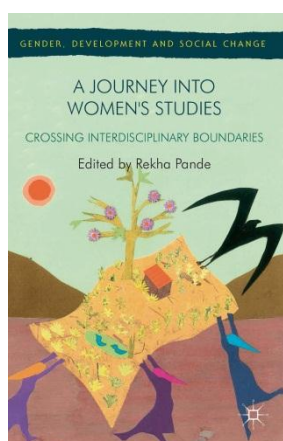
Sappho's Quest: New Volume in Women's Studies

Sachidananda Mohanty *

Vice Chancellor, Central University of Orissa, Koraput -764020, Odisha, India.



Cover page



Book details

Title: [A Journey into Women's Studies- Crossing Interdisciplinary Boundaries](#)
 Editor: [Rekha Pande](#)
 Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan Press, UK.
 Edition: 2014

Article history

Received: 09 September 2016
 Accepted: 13 September 2016

Keywords

Feminist consciousness,
 Interdisciplinary,
 Feminism,
 Gender discrimination,
 Mainstreaming,
 Women's movement

© 2016 GATHA COGNITION™ All rights reserved.

It has been quite some time that Women's Studies as a discipline found its foothold in the institutional context, and yet, barring exceptions, there have been very few accounts of the history of this discipline from the standpoint of its practitioners. It is in this sense that *A Journey into Women's Studies: Crossing Interdisciplinary Boundaries*, by Rekha Pande, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, becomes a notable academic event. Authored by various hands at the international level, the book captures the unique experience of being part of a journey of an extraordinary kind. It is a fascinating story of struggle and bravery, triumphs and tragedies that is worth sharing before the academic and larger community.

The questions that practitioners of the new discipline of Women's Studies raise and seek answers to, represent, according to the editor, a quest for 'a new paradigm' of interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research. In their firm faith in combining life-writing or self-writing with the larger academic, intellectual and

social quest, they seek to overcome the time-haloed distinction between creative writing and academic research. In looking at themselves with critical sympathy and yet objectivity, they break new ground in the domain of institutional history.

While the authors celebrate diversity and specificity in Women's Studies pedagogy, they uphold the transformative power of the new discipline. They bring in a complex 'intersection of multiple places, historical temporalities and subject positions'.

There is a welcome shift here in the image of 'women as victims' to 'women as agents of change'. Geraldine Forbes, who devoted practically her whole life to study Indian women, disproves the claims of those who contend that 'no feminist work emerged from behind the Hindu Purdah or the Muslim Harem.' Cynthia Enloe of Clark University's International Relations Program, asks: 'Who are the women in colonialism and anti-colonialism in international textual

* Author address for correspondence
 Professor Sachidananda Mohanty, Vice Chancellor, Central University of Orissa, Central Silk Board Building, Koraput – 764020, Odisha, India.
 Tel.: 06852-288222(0), E-mail(s): sachimohanty@yahoo.co.in

industry, in political economy of labor? Maithreyi Krishnaraj, the well known Indian feminist economist, recalls her first days in a Delhi University Economics class: 'What are girls doing in Economics?' asks her incredulous Professor. Her counterpart from Denmark is told early in life in a matter of fact manner that 'Maths is for men and Arithmetic and Nursing for women.' Nearly all remember the example of their mother as the role model working and inspiring behind the scene. "Why do mothers have to get up before everyone else? And why must they always carry out housework, cooking, cleaning and washing?" frequent questions that have no easy answers. No mere idealization of a parent; it raises basic questions about the political economy of the domestic sphere.

The authors record their experience — personal, professional, and intimate — with a spirit of candor and openness, rarely seen in the academic world. Drawing the lens upon themselves, they unravel their own moments of doubts, dilemma and fear and share their hours of fulfillment and despair. While some institutional Heads, Deans, Presidents, scoff at them and deride them as not being 'rigorous enough,' others prize their intellectuality but deny their significance for women's liberation. Clearly, it's a no win situation!

The journey has not been a cake walk. It has been, as the editor reports, more than the question of one more travel, one more article in a scholarly journal and one more book. Rather, it has become a critical 'instrument to problematize various contesting representation of reality and study the reality from the standpoint of women.' Sandra Coyner poses the crucial question at the heart of the disciplinary debate: 'Are we sociologists, historians and artists who happen to be interested in women, or Women's Studies people who happen to be particularly interested in social roles, history and art?'

Some of these questions resonate in the books and will continue to do so in readers' minds; for there are no easy answers here. Is Women's Studies too eclectic, as Coyner asks, one lacking 'integrity and rigor', or does it help 'in the redrawing of the educational process'? Many call for dismantling the boundaries between research and activism, their life stories emblematic of the small and big battles they fought for their honor and self-esteem, and those of their students, colleagues and the community. Others give a salutary call to involve men in this mission. Rekha Pande remembers her walks before the crack of dawn with the aged Professor Hansraj Gupta that leads to knowledge and epiphany: a bonanza in the form of a prize: to spend three precious days with Mother Teresa. Whoever said that 'Women's Studies are like an inter-caste marriage, desirable but not wanted' must think again!

The sole male contributor to the volume, Paul S. Ropp of Chinese Women's Studies recalls his mother's persistent desire to have a daughter. He records 'the enthusiastic support and warm mutual cooperation' he received from Women's Studies groups. Quoting late

Carolyn Heilbrun of Columbia University who described pioneering women scholars in the mid 20th century as 'honorary men,' he suggests archly that he be treated as an 'honorary woman'.

As Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and Agnes Smedley showed, both in life and deed, women's issues must involve all sexes and relentlessly break boundaries. A great many like Geraldine Forbes do this eminently well; going beyond the doctrinaire and politically correct, they stand out. It is these accounts that I liked the best for their uncompromising honesty and forthrightness.

A Journey into Women's Studies is an important contribution in the new discipline. It respects the diversity in approach among women critics and activists in the way the stories are narrated. Attractively packaged, with a readable style, the book will generate interest among a cross section of the academic community as well as the reading public.
