FEMINIST COMMUNITY WORK IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS:
HUMANIST IN PRACTICE AND POSTMODERN IN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The action northeast trust *(the ant)* has been working for the last twenty years in Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas. Drawing from their experiences with conflict-affected multicultural societies, this paper derives that feminist community work interventions work best when it combines humanistic and postmodern values. Challenges in feminist community work can meaningfully be addressed if a postmodern analytical framework is used to understand women's diverse experiences combined with universal values of humanism to interconnect with one another for collective action. The research uses the experiences of the author as a frontline worker in the organisation and employs reflexivity as its core analytical device.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, humanism, postmodernism, feminist community work, Northeast India

Feminist challenges of community work practice, especially in communities divided on basis of class, gender, ethnicity, religion and political identities are plenty—ranging from reemphasizing patriarchy, normalizing status-quo, compromising personal autonomy or aligning with the powerful, thus putting the practice at risk of not being effective (Dominelli, 2006). Drawing from experience of last 20 years of work of 'the action northeast trust' (***the ant***), an organisation working in Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) with divided societies, it was found that in conflict-affected societies, feminist community work interventions works best when it combines humanism (universal human values of love, cooperation, forgiveness, tolerance, compassion) and postmodernism (understanding that women experiences are subjective and divergent). The paper further argues that the combination helps to address the challenges of women to bring in harmonious co-existence, understand oppression of women and reconnect with self and with each other, thus moving towards a holistic understanding of feminist community work. In the context of the globalising world, Lena Dominelli (2006) puts forward a body of evidence to suggest that practitioners may be opportunistic, exploitative or paternalistic in practice if the local context is not considered. To avoid such misgivings, she suggests the adaptation of a holistic interactional model which considers the social, economic, physical and spiritual environments of the local context.

I.   DIVIDED WE STAND: THE WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT

> Where is my collective? It is true but then i do not have a collective here. So, how do i mobilise women? I mean, look at my field…. So many divisions. I miss a collective here (Senapati, 2005).

The dilemmas of engaging in community work as a practitioner was documented by me in a journal named, *looking within to look without*. The above excerpt from the journal was my state of dilemma in having a collective in a divided society where everyone was oppressed and posited themselves as both beneficiary and victims of the conflict. Women's predicaments as beneficiaries and survivors of conflict is multidimensional, multileveled making it complex and exhausting with constant nudges and provocation to question oppression, exploitation or subjugation that they devalue their own contributions and capabilities for social change.

The context in which this research is based is multi-ethnic with four main communities in lower Assam—the Bodos, the Adivasis, the Bengali-speaking Muslims and the Rajbongshis each claiming superiority over the other or viewing one another as the enemy with memories of discrimination, either as perpetuators or as victims of the lived conflicts. This resulted in the inability for the groups to interact with each other. The Bodos are perceived as the indigenous community and enjoy political, social, cultural and emotional hegemony over the others. The Bengali Muslims, also referred to as the Miyahs, are often alleged to be 'illegal' settlers from Bangladesh by the locals. The Rajbongshis and the Adivasis were at that time organising to demand Scheduled Tribe status from the state. The cultural distance between the Bengali-speaking Muslims and the others have become rigid in retaining cultural identities and become more polarised for political gains. Stories of peaceful co-existence between the Adivasis, Bodos and the Rajbongshis have become history as in recent times they have descended into violent sectarian fighting. The areas witnessed violence with nurtured feelings of sub-nationalism as a collective against the state (Barbora, 2006; Baruah, 1999) and yet, preserved identity differences within for political and cultural demands.

There is an unspeakability about violence even while it is ubiqituous; an appearance of exceptionalism even while it might structure the everyday; a perception of it as a tool of the crude, cruel oppressor, even when the historical record is replete with the ordinariness of the perpetrator (Kannabiran, 2016). Violence is culturally constructed. In conflict-affected societies, life must be reinvented each time anew under ever-changing circumstances as people eventually realise that violence is inconclusive (Robben & Nordstorm, 1995). Conflict pose critical ontological and epistemological challenges to feminist community work in societies that are simultaneously affected by state, ethnic and domestic violence

The irony of the whole situation was that not only have the non-Bodos been the victims of the movement, but the Bodos leaders too have been affected due to the inter-factional warfare (mostly on lines of moderate and extremist visions; if one demanded separate statehood, the other demanded independence from India). The differences are also commonly attributed to the Hindu-Christian divide. The situation was as such that villagers of one group feared to go to the villages of the other group due to the risk of getting killed. The Aie River demarcated these two

groups and *the ant's* field office was on the banks of this river, where I also lived. Cross firings between these two groups became a common feature. The 2012 inter-ethnic violence between Bodos and Muslims led to the death of 77 people and the displacement of upwards of 400,000 men, women and children. This was an extremely difficult year for the frontline workers. There was a news that *the ant* would be burnt down as it appeared to be aligned with the Muslims and the Christians. Jennifer Liang, founding member of the organisation stated,

> I was so afraid that I hid for hours in our Mushroom house. They (the organisation workers) were all looking for me, but I just sat in the dark and did not respond at all to anyone… thinking where will we go?

Differences were so stark that once a doctor refused to attend to a pregnant woman because she belonged to another community. Even mass murder in the name of ethnic cleansing became justified. Historical, political and geographical forces make it possible for a community to turn brutally on their neighbours and the failure of the state to help people transcend these identities (Mamdani, 2001). The implication of having separate groups in the same geographical area with non-fluid identities had implications on *the ant* and its work. For example, what was desirable for women was very often the safe and the supportive aspects of community practice with practical gender interest rather than strategic gender interest (Batliwala, 1994).

Living in constant fear and apprehensions that we would be thrown out of the area implicated how we engaged with the community or how we 'appeared' to position ourselves vis-a-vis all communities. This brought in agoria, an existential angst about not being able to take action. Community practice is a didactic profession where 'action' is the key and as agents of change one is supposed to act on it. The vision of the organisation itself was to 'build' a peaceful world where is love, respect and dignity for all with values of ahimsa (non-violence), honesty, humility, love, trust, truth and forgiveness. Is it possible to build collectives? Collective practices need commonalities, is that possible with fragmentation? How could one respond to the needs and interests of another group in the same environment as the needs and wishes of one cannot always be aligned with all other? How could one continue 'constructions' alongside deconstructions?

II. POSTMODERNISM, HUMANISM AND FEMINIST COMMUNITY WORK

In order to consider the relation between feminist community practice and humanism and postmodernism, I need to delineate more precisely what I mean by them. In the post enlightenment era, humanism embeds itself in liberal ideology with primacy of the subject over the objective world of social relations (Grosz, 1990). However, exploring humanism in present era, Wentzer and Mattingly (2018) propose for a humanism that is not committed to religious or metaphysical claims concerning human essence or human superiority. Even without its scientistic and Eurocentric implications, humanism can be remodelled for contemporary times (Barthélémy, 2010). This is crucial when employing humanism to further community social work where state, ethnic and domestic violence exist simultaneously. A field that is entrenched in these forms of violence would also require a new humanism that is not committed to seeing the state as superior and the only claimant to violence that is legitimised; violence in all forms must be resisted. Revisiting humanism for contemporary times and challenges would be critical for community work in areas affected by ethnic conflict. It could help transcend claims of superiority between different ethnic communities and/or viewing the other as the enemy with memories of discrimination either as perpetrators or as victims of lived conflict faced over the years.

The core of the new humanism, as Wentzer and Mattingly (2018) propose, would allow us to address humans as *humans*, and to explore whether there is something like a human condition, without presupposing qualities or features that have proven to be either unwarranted or questionable. This renewed understanding of humanism is critical to social work and key to working in conflict-affected areas. Cary Wolfe (2010) emphasized on ethical implications of moral concern and extending subjectivities. Wentzer and Mattingly (2018) revisiting the case of humanism move away from traditional humanism and urges to view humanism not only a metaphysical or religious claim but how it responds to the unrest in societies. He adds on that one could deal with human as a common indispensable denominator and explore human conditions accepting the worth of reason and ethics. To add on, social sciences in the post imperialist era have been talking about human values and its role in societies. Michael Ignatief (2017) in his book, *The Ordinary Values: Moral Order In a Divided World* talks about how the values of ordinary life of pity, compassion, tolerance, friendliness has helped societies to cohere.

Adding on, he states that these human values could create a moral order between victims and perpetuators as they are based on extreme individualism, do not generalise, do not universalise but particularise. Mark S. Umbriet (2007) iterates that ethical standards do provide conditions where people could get along and thus create commonalities for greater change. Building on the rich experience of mediators in many fields, he presents a model which is dialogue driven, humanistic and paves the way for transformative journey based in compassion, strength and humanity.

Despite its contribution, Postmodernism in conflict-affected societies is useful in theory but difficult in action, primarily because of its tendency to nihilism as it leaves practitioner with nothing but deconstructions. While particularism and intersectionality help to understand the marginality of the 'other' and the 'being' (Crenshaw, 1991), it posits the challenge of bringing together a collective for community practice which is a prerequisite for community practice. To illustrate, particularism, intersectional approach engages in deconstruction to an extent that it may lead to a state of nothingness (Lane, 1997; Rubenstein, 2003) leaving nothing for community practice to hold its ground whereby the term 'collective' itself is contradictory to postmodernist understandings where particularism is more emphasized. In the context of the research, without objective truths, people appeared to be more different than same. In a multicultural setting, Keating (2007) points out these categories can prevent us from recognising our interconnectedness with others. They may be sometimes necessary, but these inflexible labels establish and police boundaries and these identities become ends in themselves rather than help in larger goals of transformation, liberation, and social justice. The complexities created through these differences have implication on community practice; the most challenging being finding unity through these diversities and bringing women together for collective action (Dominelli, 2006).

Reflecting on the learnings from the pathbreaking book *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002), Keating (2013) posits that, amongst others, the three important tools to build radical visions for transformation were: making connections through differences; positing radical interrelatedness; and listening with raw openness. Understanding the experience of the other is essential for demonstration of human

values and thus, practice demand for a holistic framework, emphasizing on human values and postmodern understandings. The questions arising here then are – would human values dilute the understanding of women's oppression with its 'soft virtues'? Would it espouse an ideology that protects the interest of the powerful? Women have been always inscribed as less than human. Traditional humanism had never created a space to understand women's oppression. Would it categorize women as a singular category with rational understanding?

The American Humanist Alliance explains that humanist advocates the need to lead ethical lives and aspire for greater good of humanity. Yet, the structures in societies are ingrained in established cultural patriarchal prejudices that even humanists may respond in ways that negate the discrimination, impacting lives of women and other genders. Thus, the goal of feminist humanist is to not only challenge the notion of gender inferiority that lies with postmodernist understandings, but also urge the need for a human reason, compassion, empathy, and fairness. Feminist Re-examination of humanism and the importance of the woman to become rational in breaking myths of oppression is well-articulated by Karen Green (1995). Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivian (2015) highlights that feminism advocates for women's rights of equality of the sexes whereas a humanist seeks to live life on the basis of common reason and humanity. Both may have similar goals of self-determination, but a feminist humanist does not propagate misandry, are more inclusive in believing equal rights for both men and women which is found to be effective in the kind of work the organisation engages in with inclusiveness as a method. Thus, it is only with rationality that a woman needs to raise her voice against rape, even if committed by her own member of the community and that it is the same if committed by another member of the other. Community practice, in the context of conflict-affected societies with the state and with each other on basis of ethnicity, identity, land and religion is complex and the complexity of the context and its interacting system, provokes the need to combine humanism, postmodernism and feminism.

Deliberating on feminist positioning vis-à-vis humanism and postmodernism, Regina Gagnier (1990) argues that while feminism given its goal to make the world a better place for women as it presupposes its grounding in humanism, it also locates itself in postmodernist understandings via its critique of gender identity and implication of culture on gender. She goes on to explain that

feminism can demand a limit to be imposed on the process of postmodern critique of social realities and can practically use humanist construction of social realities (Gagnier, 1990). Sarah Ahmed suggests, instead of focusing on the inherent disjunction between feminism vis-à-vis postmodernism and humanism, moving towards an alternative and constructive approach within feminism of humanist (liberal) and postmodern tendencies thereby focusing on a practical understanding of gender relations in practice (Sara Ahmed, 1996). Feminist Community work can take a pragmatic and inclusive position to include both humanism and postmodernism in practice. That community work is gendered is something most acquiesce to suggesting the crucial need of weaving in feminist consciousness in community work. Feminist community work is a vehicle for feminist ideology, theory and practice and to work towards egalitarianism using consciousness raising and stressing that the personal is political and the political is personal (Dominelli, 2006).

However, in the context of conflict, feminist community work that aims at consciousness raising is challenging as it requires a collective. Feminism doesn't see woman as a singular category or emphasizes on unity but it is committed to women as collective (Ahmed, 1996). Women's experiences differ as gender intersects with class, caste and race. This politics of difference may not have the space to include humanism but the need for a collective in community practice creates this space for including humanism in its practice. Feminist community work doesn't generalise but emphasises on particularism. Dominelli (2002) lists the following as feminist principles relevant to practice and evident in feminist community work -

- Recognising the diversity of women;
- Valuing women's strengths;
- Eliminating the privileging of certain groups of women to prevent difference from becoming a basis for unequal power relations between different groups of women;
- Considering women as active agents capable of making decisions themselves in all aspects of their lives;
- Locating individual women in their social situations and acknowledging edging the interconnections between the individual and collect entities relevant to them;
- Providing women with the space to voice their own needs and solutions to problems;
- Acknowledging that the principle 'the personal is political' is relevant at macro, meso and micro levels of practice;

- Redefining private woes as public issues;
- Ensuring that women's needs are addressed within the context of their being seen as whole human beings in which each area of interacts with the others;
- Recognising the interdependent nature of human relations and through that, realising that what happens to one individual or group has implications for everyone else;
- Recognising that women's individual problems have social causes and addressing both levels in each intervention.

Thus, feminist community work can adopt an eclectic approach to journey through the complicated context of conflict, thereby expanding its scope. At this point, I take the support of *the ant's* creative intervention (stroking the peace stove) to defend my argument and highlight the possibility holistic work.

III.   STROKING THE PEACE STOVE

Postmodern in Thought and Humanism in Practice

Having worked for three years as a grassroots worker in the context of conflict, I was extremely confused and no longer confident of 'my' journey with the people and the area and tried to reflect in my published journal. Thereafter, I left the organisation (not the connection) and returned in 2014 to revisit for my thesis. With reflexivity, revisiting my journal and engaging again with people (this time as a researcher), I was amazed to witness the transformations the organisation had gone through. The first two weeks, when I was catching up with the place, meeting friends and families I had stayed, a word called *manobota* (humanism) kept appearing in the conversations and that *manobota* was responsible for the transformations in the area.

Practice wisdoms are much required to fill in the gap between theory and practice (Boddy, O'Leary, Tsui, Pak, & Wang, 2018; Kamei, 2015). Without ignoring the broader context and the implication it had on women, the practitioners in the field kept finding ways to initiate work with women at the centre. A holistic interactional model addresses the complex and fluid realities faced by the community (Dominelli, 2006) along with valuing interdependency and interconnectedness. It espouses values of dignity, respect, personal autonomy, integrity, power sharing and accountability. The organisation did consider the context with postmodernist

approach, tried not to exhaust women in organising them for community work and dream for peace and an improved future. Humanistic values guided the organisation's mission and vision and also reflected in practice.

There are many instances that one can put as evidence and for the consideration of this essay, I chose to put the story of where women with different community identities came together to make *chowkas* (stoves), to respond to their needs to address fuel crisis. I chose this story because the story speaks of mutuality and gives hope for a newer way to look at futures and women's contribution to it without losing sight of the broader community in context. Hope which is an important humanistic value, Collins (2015) explains, is an essential quality in social work that helps maintain faith and belief in the future. It envelopes the potential for transformation and change in societies and communities. Simple actions that like teaching how to make the *chowkas* out of empathy and concern for women from another community helped in looking beyond possible feelings of despair and hopelessness in the face of violence.

Coming together to make chowkas

In March 2015, **the ant** brought together 16 women from the villages of Amteka, Patabari and Rowmari (villages in the area) together for a training to create mud chowkas or cooking stoves in their homes. These chowkas use lesser wood and emit lesser smoke. They have been traditionally used by Bengali-speaking Muslim women for whom access to firewood from the forests was either difficult or expensive for heavy use. The resource persons for this training session were two Bengali-speaking Muslim women from Koliagaon village – Fumala Khatun and Asma Khatun. Forgetting their differences, these women bonded over these chowkas in a bid to help each other out in the face of depleting forest cover. The changing ecological realities have spelt difficult times for Bodo women who spend hours of the day gathering firewood fuel. For those who can afford to buy, they spend much money putting a pressure on the family economy. The Bengali-speaking Muslim women had long before found a way to economise the use of firewood given their socio-political realities. Working in teams of two, the trainees learnt to mix the right proportion of soil and cow dung and shape the low wood consuming, low smoke stoves. Domonti Brahma, one of the organisers of the training and a trainee said, some of our Bodo women walk for 2-3 kms in search of firewood and so, fuel efficient stoves will be very much helpful and save their time and also money spent in firewood (the ant, 2015 annual report).

The women were making these *chowkas*, after the region witnessed multiple conflicts and the communities living here were always in apprehension that 'anything' could trigger another conflict. Some of their villages were burnt down and they were positioned with one another as both perpetrators and beneficiaries of violence. They even feared go to one another's village even if they were neighbouring. Human rights activists, voluntary organisations, students' union and state interventions further segregated their differences and implication of violence was articulated only through their community identity lens. As a result of such singular non-fluid identities, the connection with one another was lost.

Women living in the area were not just women but women belonging to different ethnic and religious groups with distinct identities of being a Bodo Woman, Muslim Woman, Adivasi woman or Rajbongshi Woman. However, identity-based communities (as in this case) often create an 'in-group' and an 'out-group' using the attributes of gender, ethnicity, disability, religion and so on, thereby sharpening differences with other groups (Dominelli, 2006). It is in this context that *the ant* had created the space by emphasising human values—respect for one another, empathy, love—for interaction of the Bodo and Muslim women to learn from one another and to help one another and also address the issue of fuel crisis, an issue affecting all of them. They came together because they were driven by empathy and concern for one another and could look beyond the ethnic differences and the politically driven conflicts of the past, to help each other in solidarity to resolve problems that women face irrespective of the political realities, in their case being fuel crisis. This was not easy. Even though they had to live the collateral damages created by sustained conflict, they were yet not ready to come together. They were perceived by one another as perpetrator, beneficiary and survivors of violence. If the Muslim women blamed the Bodo people, the Bodo people too had seen some of the villages burnt by the Muslim Bengalis.

Understanding the experience of the other is essential for demonstration of human values and ethics thus, demanding an intersectional analytical framework, emphasising on particularism. *The ant's* shift to focus on humanistic values was a turning point in their programmatic approach paving way to bridge the obstacles laid down by particularism. *The ant* adopted a vision to connect women from different ethnicities living in the same geographical area by helping them to listen each other's experiences of daily difficulties, pain and violence, and work towards

redistribution of power through demonstration of human values. Through the process of creating *chowkas,* the women engaged in understanding the daily struggles of each other's households and helped in reducing the troubles. There was a mutual concern for the lives fellow women lived and the *chowkas* was a way to ease these difficulties. It was a way to discover the difficulties that interconnected them rather than their ethnicities that divided them and contribute towards making communities more humane for all.

The implication of such interaction could be multifarious, and one is not establishing a cause-effect relationship here. Nevertheless, initially when I was working at **the ant** we did not have courage and the strategy to work on violence against women whether it was the case of witch-hunting or rape by community leader or silence on domestic violence. Today, **the ant** has a legal aid centre for women headed by a Muslim advocate where Bodo women come to seek help. One of the founding members proudly stated, "In 2015, when the entire area again witnessed violence, our villages were unaffected, and I am inclined to believe that *manobota* (humanism) prevailed.'

One of the trustees, Habiya Islam, commented,

> True Islam is about being humane. It doesn't tell you to be hating one another. In fact, it tells you to share your wealth with the poor, to be respectful of women and to do good to others. I feel happy that we could teach my Bodo friends *chowkas* making. It will save them the trouble of walking every day. Today, some of my best friends are Bodo women and I have learnt so much from their culture. Essentially, we are same, our pains are same and the oppression we face from the men is the same. There is no difference, and I connect with another woman just as a woman. Today, I have a better status at home and in the community because they know I stand up to injustice. Even the local zamaats consider my opinions and take my suggestions.

Though a new humanism would succeed without reliance on religious texts, the humanistic values enshrined in religious texts help communities for whom religion is part of their cohesive identity to accept these values in daily living. Much of values people subscribe to, emerge from our religious texts. Habiya uses these values enshrined in her religion to mobilise women and negotiate with men. The urge to interpret the text in a feminist perspective comes to her due to her faith in humanistic values. She firmly believes that men have interpreted the text wrongly and it is time for people to revisit Islam based on humanistic values that it preaches. She takes

her learnings from Islam on love, sharing and caring, and expand into her struggles for equality and justice in public as well as domestic spaces. It helps that across religions, these values have always been seen as integral to their religious philosophy of daily living.

Another worker, Manju commented,

> Now that I am a part of the organisation, I need to live up to its values. *The ant* has benefitted so many people; the domestic workers now have their own weaving business and I feel proud working here.

Acknowledging the differences that existed between the communities that she was working with, Manju saw the commonalities that existed simultaneously and the various trainings that she received in the organisation made her integrate humanistic values into her being. The context of community work in Northeast India is complicated with multiple struggles and conflicts where people's lives are deeply compromised. The complexity of these contexts and its interacting system provokes the need for community work to be approached with both postmodern and humanistic approaches. It is pertinent to understand oppression with intersectionality and build interconnectedness based on human values as it allows people to rise above the self to interconnect and create commonalities which underpins solidarity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Stroking the stove of peace is a story of transformation where women compartmentalised in separate categories in the context reconnected with the other through their life experiences and they emphasized on universal human values to reshape their worlds in more humane directions. To conclude, interconnectedness building, locating women in their social situations, recognising interdependency to understand implication, the need to be seen as whole human beings does calls for an approach to analyse heterogeneity (with postmodern lens) and also to be attentive to the need for building collectives through interconnectedness (emphasizing human values) for emancipatory action.

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