Feminist Epistemology and the Web-based Text: Reflections on Raya Sarkar's List

Raginee Sarmah

The cyberspace has been harnessed by feminists as a medium to lay down theoretical formulations, launch critical debates, generate activism, and consolidate solidarity networks. The access to cyberspaces, it is believed, is an access to the 'public' sphere through which a woman transcends not just the confines of her 'private' sphere but also her immediate identity which she embodies. The subversive potential of the 'web' creates (or weaves) networks which act as sites for women to assert their selfhood (Plant 45). Such a consideration needs to be wary of the reinstatement of the binaries of public/private which are not always as neat as they are considered to be. The public space becomes the site of 'rational dialogue' and women, being the negative of men, are deemed to be devoid of any rationality which legitimises their absence from the sphere. The claim to the public space for women is then caught in a fraught relationship with politics of embodiment. It is a reclamation which aids the augmentation or reworking of the body along with the counter-discursive change in the nature of the public sphere. As Faith Wilding suggests, the linkage between the terms 'cyber' and 'feminism' alerts us to crucial new information being generated on the internet where "...each part of the term necessarily modifies the meaning of the 'other'" (Wilding).

In recent years, the quasi-oral dictum on the Internet has generated a different mode of feminist intervention where social media becomes a forum for addressing harassment. The production of meaning in the cyber realm has been characterised by a mark of instability in the grammar of its framed political articulation. The #MeToo campaign, for example, saw millions of women sharing their narratives of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. The making of 'history' lay in the creation of the 'self' or the 'artifice' through the text, thereby visibilising what was invisibilised in institutional registers of documentation. While the discourse shaped online is grounded in materiality and lived realities, it is important to be cognisant of the broader feminist agenda and the proportionate burden which is absorbed by the cyberspace in its transgressions. These considerations have arisen from the

macro-politics of the feminist imagination which lies in tandem with the micro-politics of intervention.

The modality of testimony has seen a shift with this. The realm of experience has become a criterion of credibility to generate proof. The nature of performing victimhood registers a change. To be a victim is to adhere to a prescribed role and script to generate a sympathetic response and the web-based discourse seeks to overturn the narrative. The notion of legal validity is superseded by ethical claims. This paper analyses the discursive nature of 'experience.' As texts released and relayed in the digital forum, the authority of the author comes into question. Without names and personal narratives, Raya Sarkar's List of 'alleged sexual harassers' in the academia is one such text which frames a new turn in our understanding of feminist politics. The 'List' (with a capital *l*) then is not an ordinary inventory but a potent text which transforms the diurnal activity of list making. In the length of a year, the List has begun to acquire a form of canonicity given the excess of literature being produced on it and the conflicting readings it provokes. The List can be observed as a cultural text with contextual adaptations being curated with variance in context, modality, and location. The act of listing can be seen an act of reordering. Is it a worldview that is being reordered? Does the List as a text allow the 'concealment' if not the 'death' of its 'author'? What contexts limit this text and what contexts does it transcend? These are a few enquiries which will inform the textual interrogation of these web-based processes with a specific focus on the List.

Sarkar's list has a brief preface of two sentences. In the first sentence, she names two prominent professors as 'alleged sexual harassers.' The second sentence asks readers, "If anyone knows of academics who have sexually harassed/were sexually predatory to them PM me, let's discuss and I'll add them to the list of alleged sexual harassers" (Sarkar). The List, like all lists, is a process of classification. The form of the list enables a certain form of knowledge practice to "...make problems amenable to targeted, cross-boundary intervention in novel ways" (Goude et al. 2). Lists have agency; they have been responsible for political developments and contain a performative potential. The non-narrative form of the list makes it an interesting form of writing where the politics of listing is situated in the cutting down of language and imposing silences as signifiers to posit its site of contestation. The List which was initially released with the names of 72 men had no other detail other than the names of professors and the institutions where they are employed. At three places, the nature of abuse faced by the survivor was mentioned against the name of the 'alleged

harasser.' Urs Stäheli argues that the list as a technique of ordering knowledge is distinguished by its capacity to create meaning and generate objectivity in a way that is non-narrative (234). The symbolic 'cut' of a list which transforms it into a motile entity faces a challenge in Sarkar's list. Although fashioned as an instructional text for women who are going to step into the university space later, the list does not cite any process of verification. Her list loosely argues for a rejection of the search for logically consistent, self-evident 'true' grounds for any discourse which rests on institutional backing. While the victim is always touted to be devoid of language, here is an act of rejection of language framed by the establishment. Hence, the epistemic and regulatory techniques of her list are in constant dialogue with the semantics of legal validity or what has been captured in common parlance as 'due process.'

The List undermines and exposes power structures as it transmits, produces, and redistributes power and in so doing, makes itself a part of the network of texts which address the question of sexual violence in the university and its relation with the verticals of power. Institutional mechanisms like GSCASH (Gender Sensitisation Committee Against Sexual Harassment) or ICC (Internal Complaints Committee) have repeatedly failed women students and students from marginalised genders. The list identified powerful names hailing from privileged caste and class locations, thereby hinting that the elected bodies, the fair trials, and the policy instruments are not enough to combat sexual harassment. The stark gap between the creators of the List and the names it enlisted in terms of power differentials was not lost on the creators as well as the scrutinizers. V Geetha calls the List 'a vulnerable piece of testimony' which makes the survivors and perpetrators recede in the background. The problematic, the text raises, is the culture of the University "...for the power and authority it invests in charismatic individuals" (Geetha).

The 'University' becomes the 'materialised society of discourse' which controls and preserves discourses within a closed space (Foucault). In a way, it seeks to assume control over the production of counter-discourses in order to deflect its potential dangers. The List, since its inception, has been pitted against the struggle of the formation of anti-sexual harassment policies and bodies on campus. In this regard, the discourse around such a list faces constraints not just from the totalising narrative of the university but also the 'tailor-made' structure of an online text. While it is in contestation with the University it also exists within the echo-chamber that is a University.

The presence of the List, under these conditions, creates an anxiety which signals towards a moment of possibility. While the document was released from Raya Sarkar's Facebook account and the discourse, at large, uses her name as the signifier, like all texts the list too consists of multiple writings which are in dialogue with one another. In Barthes' language, the 'indiscernible voices' in the list fashion a political voice through cohesion which finds articulation in Raya's profile (*S/Z* 1). A text always contains signs referring to the author but the author need not be a 'real individual.' Sarkar's list gives rise to several selves, several subjects, and several experiences while simultaneously identifying the text with a proper noun (Foucault 123). Discursive containment in the wired world also takes place through other condensed signifiers such as hashtags. One such example is Tarana Burke's campaign which caught momentum through the hashtag 'MeToo.' In this regard, the 'author' of the text is a structuring principle and the authorial problem of the proper noun is countered by escaping the 'paradoxical singularity' of the text. Sarkar's List organises and sustains the testimony (without narrative) of numerous women who were threatened, violated, and made uncomfortable by powerful men in academia. The author then is an ideological product who regulates the 'proliferation of meaning' through the discourse (Foucault 126).

The contributors to the List are participants in the discursive exercise of naming harassment in the university. However, the pertinent question one struggles to answer is how a subject enters the discourse. In other words, does a subject enter the discourse by exerting its agency or does the discourse construct the subject? It has been argued that subjects are constituted through experiences which create a category of 'difference' distinguishing one set of people from another. The list alerts us to several such dichotomies prevalent in the university: male/female, *Savarna[1]/Dalit[2]*, powerful/powerless, perpetrator/victim. Sarkar and the proponents of the List have repeatedly articulated the need to listen to the experiences of these women (mostly, *Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi*[3] women) in order to understand the enormity of

---

[1]Refers to a sociological and political constituency of people who fall under the four-folds of the varna system. They are also called caste-Hindus.

[2]The self-descriptive label adopted by the social class called the 'Scheduled Caste' in the Indian Constitution is included in this category. The word is used self-consciously with the awareness of the history of oppression faced by the community.

[3]The term '*Bahujan*' refers to 'the majority of people.' The word is used to evoke a sense of solidarity across marginalised communities. *Dalits* and *Adivasis* are people who fall under the category of present day Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), respectively.

the power play which structures the university as much as any other place in the world. However, one wonders how often the evidence of experience is recognized only to establish 'experience' as a 'fact of difference.' Joan Scott in "The Evidence of Experience" argues instead for "...a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (777). The 'testimony' delivers its purpose by making 'visible' what was kept hidden by the structures of power. The 'visible' then is advantaged. The absence of narrativised testimony in the List is not just a difference in the modality of intervention. Apart from the style of indictment for which the List is criticised, this absence is also a scrutiny of the subject-positions of the creators of the List vis-a-vis the names on the List. The change in the modality of displaying resistance portrays the reliance on the tendency of naturalising differences. Sarkar's List problematizes the status of experience outside its discursive character. The unquestionable ground of its explanation is challenged with a linguistic turn when the meaning of 'sexual harassment,' on the basis of which the evidence conditions the narrative, is reconstructed. 'Experience,' it is understood, is also a linguistic event and is characterised through established meanings (Scott 793). It is the conflict of the different available meanings which makes the discursive exercise possible. The List has opened up conversations on the broadening of the definition of sexual harassment owing to the various axes on which these vulnerabilities are exploited.

One such critique that the List extends to the existing discourse of sexual harassment in academia is on the lines of caste. The articulation of the need for *Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi* women to 'speak differently' was registered sharply in the dialogue that ensued after the publishing of the List. One saw the emergence of two camps: established feminists versus new ones who seemed eager to discard older models of grievance redressal. In varying contexts, power produces gendered beings and determines their interaction with the axes of caste, class, region, or ability. However, the internal logic of the first list is challenged by the second list which floated in social media with an anonymous claim made on it by *Dalit-Bahujan* women exclusively. This list identified well-known *Dalit-Bahujan* activists as potent sexual predators thereby threatening the binarisms which Sarkar's List was operating on. The lack of any reaction generated by the second list hints towards the irreproducibility of the 'moment' which arrived with the release of the first list. Thus, the claim to a certain 'universality of experience' made by the List collapses in the production of the second one, thus, directing us to the ephemerality of the mode of intervention.

The List, in many journalistic writings, has been labelled as the 'published rumour mill.' The strategy used is interesting as the corpus of both subaltern and feminist studies uses gossip and rumour as sources of oral history. The oral, in the newer epistemological traditions, is considered to be subversive and documenting this history challenges the hierarchy of the written over the oral (Gopal). What does it mean to the feminist sensibility when the whisper network is relayed in virtual print for public consumption? This intervention can be looked at as a feminist counter-practice evoked in desperation to identify the lapses in the institutional machinery. It has been argued that the practice of 'naming and shaming' has always been done in villages outside the protection of great institutions as a form of retributive justice. The question here remains how far vulnerability can be contested through the recourse to law. The discourse around sexual harassment has not only been understood in terms of its expressive value but also modes of existence, circulation, attribution, and appropriation and modification with each culture.

Raya Sarkar's Google document saw the addition of many more names. Similarly, many other lists came out in different universities, workplaces, and departments. Another movement which follows the trajectory of the List but takes a different approach is the Speak-Out movement in Kerala. Started by *Dalit-Bahujan* women, the campaign witnessed women speaking up on social media about the sexual harassment they were subjected to in workplaces, friend circles, activist spaces, and the public sphere in general. The critique which the List faced on account of the absence of narratives from the 'victims' was undone with this campaign. The transition from being a 'victim' to a 'survivor' was asserted with these narratives with a sharp *'Dalit-Bahujan'* voice. The campaign was also significant because it did not just target powerful professors who dictated the terms of the classroom but their close male comrades who engaged in 'progressive politics.' The movement also fleshed out a sharp critique of *brahmanical* values which sanctioned the violation of a *Dalit* woman's body and threw light on the particular struggle which *Dalit-Bahujan* women have led in order to acquire certain spaces.

The List has several contributors but one addressee. The authorial problem with the proper noun is specific to the List. The names on the List have been furnished by several women including savarna women. While a large number of *savarna* women can choose to stay anonymous, a queer *Dalit* woman, Raya Sarkar, has chosen to be visible with these names. The personal implication of the labour of association with the List, tied to rape threats and boycott from the acade-

mia, is colossal. That the burden of labour was taken up by a *Dalit* woman signals towards the protection of anonymity which is available only to a few. It is also worthwhile to note Sarkar's exceptionalism in her claim to identity which builds the premise on which the politics of this listing thrives and alerts us to the logic of the second list's failure.

Even when we see the List as a critique, it alerts us to the obstruction faced by certain voices in reaching institutional mechanisms. Is the List then solely the burden of the marginalised even when we recognise the binary frameworks which power creates and escapes simultaneously? The textual and sexual politics of the List is intertwined in a way that in its configuration, it resists binaries. It, however, chalks out the nature of identitarian politics and violence which institutions reproduce even as they seek to annihilate it. The plea Sarkar makes sees beyond the gradation of sexual trauma. Following this Vqueeram Aditya Sahai writes, "If the list commits itself to no hierarchy between offences, then it cannot stop at naming only one frame of power. Yet, what does it mean to name everyone?" The value of categorisation is native to any list. The question of wrongful inclusion due to the variance in the degree of hurt caused loses relevance when looked at against the larger framework of patriarchy, caste, and capitalism. While the list retains nuance and, by extension, power through the sorting it ensured, does the continuous practice of hurt under the oppressive structures which render everyone 'listable' make the list powerless?

While feminist struggles have built and sustained policies and institutions to address skewed power relations in a caste-based patriarchal society, *Dalit*, *Bahujan*, and *Adivasi* women continue to be doubly marginalised in a manner whereby the vocabulary of *Brahmanical* law does not ensure justice. The List is also a call for rethinking feminist strategy for a reform which is social, political, legal, and economic in nature. Thus, the concern of 'experienced feminists' can be located in their anxiety of 'due processes' being toppled over, but the culture of impunity which surpasses the ambit of these bodies alerts us to the limitations of bureaucratic methods themselves.

Criticism on the List has come from several quarters. While some contended that it considered proof to be unnecessary, a few worried that it took pleasure out of the classroom. To forget that the word 'proof' is a loaded term is dangerous to feminist thought. The List directs us to the complexity of producing narrative as evidence. It is also a commentary on the accessibility of 'due process' which is reliant on the exhibition of ability. Thus, the language which these processes demand is a structural inequity that the feminist movement needs to

grapple with. The List enables speech about sexual harassment without necessitating the production of evidence. It challenges the narrative of power by modifying the location of the powerful and powerless. Moreover, the List is a text with multiple readings in conversation with each other and these contestations culminate in the reader. How should the readers on whom the corpus of the text settles react to it? What burden does the List put on the readers? Our task as feminist readers is to develop a sharper critique of the structures that constitute the culture of impunity. The recognition of the interconnectedness of the struggles of caste and patriarchy is crucial for building solidarity and resistance. The paper has aimed to view the List as a 'moment' and not a 'method.' The List never claimed to transform the power imbalances that the university produces and sustains. It was the result of not being heard and believing that no speech mattered anymore. The moment directs us to awareness where we see all of us in a public trial charged against some 'registry' of power.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of an Author." *S/Z.* Hill and Wang, 1974.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 113–138.

---. "The Order of Discourse" *Untying The Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader,* edited by Robert Young, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981, pp. 51–78.

Geetha, V. "Raya Sarkar's list of sexual predators not the problem, allowing harassers the benefit of anonymity is." *First Post,* 31 October 2017, www.firstpost.com.

Goede, Marieke de., et al. "Introduction: The Politics of the List." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 34, no.1, 2016, pp. 3–13. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0263775815624561?journalCode=epda.

Gopal, Priyamvada. The Oral Versus The Written. *Facebook,* 30 October 2017, 12:09 am. https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10214791162716539&id=1349680135.

Habermas, J. *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays.* Trans. and ed. Max Pinsky. Polity Press. 2001.

Plant, Sadie. 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics.' *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*, edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, Sage Publications Ltd. 1995, pp. 45–64.

Sahai, Vqueeram Aditya. Critique of the List. *Facebook,* 25 October 2017, 12:04 am. https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Vqueeram%20Aditya%20Sahai%20list.

Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 773–797. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343743.

Staheli, Urs. "Listing the Global: Dis/Connectivity Beyond Representation" *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory,* vol. 13, no. 3, 2012, pp. 233–46.

Stier, Raya Sarkar. The List of Sexual Harassment in Academia. *Facebook*, 24 October 2017, 12:25 am. m.facebook.com/RxyaSxrkar/posts/1686281001419245.

Wilding, Faith. "Where is Feminism in Cyber feminism?" www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html.