



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

Volume-XI, Issue-II, March 2025, Page No. 299-305

Published by Scholar Publications, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <https://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v11.i2.27



Situated Knowledge and Feminist Epistemology: Analysing Gendered Knowledge in the Indian and Assamese Contexts

Pritismita Patgiri

Research Scholar, Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati, India

Dr. James Chacko

Professor, Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati, India

Received: 22.02.2025; Accepted: 21.03.2025; Available online: 31.01.2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of feminist epistemology and its connection with situated knowledge, emphasizing the role of gendered knowledge in shaping epistemic perspectives. Feminist epistemology is associated with situated knowledge, meaning knowledge is always conditioned by the subject and their particular situation, including space, time, history, culture, and society. Situated knowledge is linked to communities rather than isolated individuals, though universal knowledge can be derived from particular knowledge. Drawing upon the works of Haraway, Anderson, Grasswick, and others, this study examines how social, historical, and cultural factors shape knowledge. It further explores how feminist epistemology influences gendered experiences and knowledge production in the Indian and Assamese contexts. Through an analysis of the challenges and difficulties presented by patriarchal knowledge systems and the importance of marginalized perspectives, this study emphasizes the need for epistemic justice in diverse cultural contexts.

Key Words: *Gender knowledge, Feminist Epistemology, Situated Knowledge, Epistemic Justice, Patriarchal Knowledge Systems.*

Introduction:

Feminist epistemology challenges traditional notions of objective knowledge by asserting that knowledge is always situated. This means that knowledge is shaped by the social position of the knower, including factors such as gender, class, race, and cultural background. Donna Haraway's (1991) theory of situated knowledge presupposes that knowledge is always partial and specific, rather than universal and detached. She argues that it is objectivity, rather than being an abstract and neutral position, must be understood through embodied and situated perspectives.

This paper examines how feminist epistemology critiques traditional epistemology and highlights the influence of gender on knowledge production. By focusing on gendered experiences, it explores the exclusionary tendencies in mainstream epistemological frameworks and emphasizes the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives. The study also evaluates the implications of feminist epistemology in the Indian and Assamese contexts, demonstrating how gendered knowledge has historically been shaped by socio-cultural dynamics and continues to influence contemporary epistemic structures.

Theoretical Foundations of Feminist Epistemology:

According to Brooker (2002), women have different experiences from men, and the knowledge produced by women is based on their experiences. Since women's knowledge is situated, their experiences are shaped by different social locations, times, places, and situations, making their knowledge distinct from men's. Situated knowledge reflects particular perspectives of women, including their emotions, attitudes, interests, and values (Anderson, 2017).

Feminist epistemology is concerned with women's experiences and behaviours that have been historically silenced. Here, a woman is both the subject of knowledge and the possessor of subjective experiences, which differ from an objective stance. Women's personal experiences and information highlight the direct link between their consciousness and knowledge production (Brooker, 2002). Harding (1987) raises fundamental questions about knowledge, such as '*Who is the knower?*' and '*Can a woman be a knower?*' Traditional epistemology has largely excluded women as agents of knowledge, prompting the emergence of feminist epistemology, which recognizes women as subjects of knowledge. Feminist epistemology critically examines the male-centric biases in scientific and philosophical knowledge. It explores theories of knowledge related to what and how we can '*know*' and *who is allowed to 'know'* (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

There are three main perspectives within feminist epistemology:

- **Feminist Empiricism:** This approach, within a naturalized framework, seeks standards for distinguishing when situatedness generates errors and when it contributes to advancing knowledge.
- **Feminist Standpoint Theory:** This theory identifies particular social perspectives as epistemically privileged, asserting that marginalized groups may have a more comprehensive understanding of social realities.
- **Feminist Postmodernism:** This perspective rejects claims of epistemic privilege and emphasizes the contingency and instability of the social identity of knowers, and consequently, their representations (Anderson, 2015).

Feminist epistemologists have developed these approaches to highlight how gender, social location, and power dynamics shape knowledge production. By addressing these perspectives, this study explores how feminist epistemology contributes to a broader

understanding of knowledge in different socio-cultural contexts, particularly within India and Assam.

Elizabeth Anderson (2012) argues that feminist epistemology focuses on ways of knowing and how knowledge is socially situated. She emphasizes that individuals' experiences, shaped by social roles and status, influence what they know and how they know it. Feminist epistemology critiques traditional epistemological approaches that claim objectivity while often ignoring the influence of gender. Anderson's perspective suggests that mainstream epistemologies must be re-examined to acknowledge the biases inherent in knowledge production. Grasswick (2011) explains that feminist epistemology is grounded in situated knowledge, countering traditional claims that knowledge is detached from social contexts. Instead, it argues that marginalized perspectives, such as those of women, provide unique insights into knowledge production. By highlighting how gender and other intersectional factors influence epistemic credibility, feminist epistemology challenges androcentric biases in fields such as philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. This theoretical foundation serves as a basis for understanding how gendered knowledge shapes societal structures and intellectual traditions.

According to Harding (1987), the traditional epistemology system denied the existence of women as knowers, positioning men as the only subjects in history and sociological concepts. Feminists proposed an alternative knowledge theory that recognizes women as knowers, establishing the foundation of feminist epistemology.

Feminist Epistemology and Social Justice:

Feminist epistemology challenges traditional epistemological frameworks by advocating for epistemic justice. Yavad (2018) describes feminist epistemology as an approach that critiques patriarchal knowledge systems and recognizes the role of dominant structures in shaping knowledge production. It provides an alternative framework that values the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Anderson (2020) expands this perspective by explaining that situated knowers are influenced by embodiment, cognitive styles, emotions, background beliefs, and social relations. These factors shape how knowledge is formed and evaluated, demonstrating that objectivity is not a static ideal but a negotiated process influenced by diverse epistemic standpoints. Feminist epistemology also addresses epistemic injustice, particularly in male-dominated fields. Pookkat (2011) critiques how mainstream epistemology often overlooks women's knowledge and perspectives in shaping scientific and philosophical discourse. By challenging the traditional exclusion of women's voices, feminist epistemology advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to knowledge production.

Epistemology, in general, discusses the nature of knowledge, its sources, conditions, structure, and limitations. Classical epistemologists such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have defined knowledge differently. Socrates claimed that '*Virtue is knowledge,*' while Plato argued that justified true belief constitutes knowledge. Aristotle viewed knowledge as dependent on its purpose or telos. Descartes, central to Western epistemology, emphasized certainty through the dictum '*I think, therefore I am*' (Newman, 2019). However, feminist

critiques argue that classical Western epistemology has historically ignored women as knowers. Nya (2004) notes that Descartes never acknowledged women's knowledge. Kant similarly dismissed women's capacity for moral agency, describing them as weak and incapable of autonomous thinking. Harding (1987) critiques traditional epistemology for denying women's role as knowers, arguing that history and sociological concepts have centered men as the sole epistemic subjects. To counter this, feminist scholars propose feminist epistemology as an alternative knowledge theory that includes women as knowers.

It offers emancipatory methods that revise traditional theorizing. Anderson (2000) argues that feminist epistemology challenges oppressive institutional structures and redefines epistemology to include social factors in knowledge production. Longino and Lennon (1997) further emphasize that feminist inquiry is not a distinct method but a methodological feature that applies scientific theory to research on women, distinguishing feminist epistemology from traditional knowledge frameworks. Women's epistemology differs from men's due to variations in personality, ability, behaviour, and values. Crawford and Marecek (1989) outline feminist knowledge theories that explain women's unique ways of knowing. Feminist Empiricism asserts that gender bias in knowledge can be eliminated through rigorous research design and objective norms. Feminist Standpoint Theory argues that women's lived experiences provide them with unique perspectives for understanding social relations. Feminist Postmodernism rejects the idea of epistemic privilege and highlights the instability of social identity in knowledge production (Crawford and Marecek, 1989).

By highlighting marginalized perspectives, feminist epistemology promotes epistemic justice and challenges androcentric biases in knowledge systems. It serves as a critical intervention in philosophy, advocating for more inclusive and socially responsible ways of knowing.

Feminist Epistemology in the Indian Context:

In India, feminist epistemology is integral to addressing issues of gender inequality and social justice. It helps to challenge gender inequalities and promote fairness by ensuring that women's voices and experiences are included in the way knowledge is formed. Bhattacharyya (2009) highlights how feminist research in India prioritizes women's lived experiences and cultural backgrounds, arguing for an epistemology that is empathetic and politically engaged. The Indian feminist movement has played a crucial role in bringing to light how knowledge production has historically marginalized women's voices, particularly in academic and policy-making circles.

Similarly, Sahin (2016) emphasizes the role of feminist epistemology in challenging patriarchal ideologies (a system where men have more power) and advocating for women's empowerment. By questioning the validity of knowledge claims rooted in male-dominated structures, feminist epistemologists in India seek to deconstruct hierarchical systems of knowledge dissemination. Mehrotra (2017) asserts that feminist epistemology

problematizes the assumed objectivity of mainstream scientific and philosophical knowledge. It challenges the 'malestream' approach that often disregards women's experiences and contributions. For example, many rural women have deep knowledge or experience in farming, herbal medicine, and community leadership. However, this knowledge has often been dismissed as unimportant. In academia, women's contributions are often ignored in history, science, and literature, etc. Feminist epistemology advocates for a knowledge system that recognizes diverse perspectives, particularly those of marginalized women communities. Feminist epistemology is not just about studying knowledge; it is about using knowledge to bring real change to society.

Feminist Epistemology in Assam:

Saharia (2021) examines the reflection of feminist epistemology in Assamese literature, particularly in modern poetry. She highlights how Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi's poetry portrays women's emotions and psychological struggles. By using characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Bordoloi explores the complexities of women's lived experiences, demonstrating how gendered knowledge is deeply rooted in cultural narratives. Assamese feminist scholars argue that these literary expressions serve as epistemic sources that challenge traditional gender roles and provide alternative ways of knowing.

Emotion plays a significant role in feminist epistemology, particularly in the Indian and Assamese contexts. Jha and Nagar (2015) discuss how women's emotions are often devalued, leading to their exclusion from decision-making processes. Dyhouse (2010) highlights the societal belief that fathers are responsible for shaping their sons' futures, while mothers serve as role models for their daughters. Such gendered knowledge constructs reinforce traditional roles and limit women's access to public knowledge and authority. These biases extend beyond literature and familial structures into professional domains as well.

The corporate sector in Assam also reflects gendered biases. Gosain (2015) notes that female bosses are often viewed as overly emotional, reinforcing stereotypes that undermine women's leadership capabilities. This reflects broader epistemic biases where emotional intelligence, often associated with women, is undervalued in professional settings. These patterns highlight how situated knowledge informs gendered experiences within various spheres, necessitating structural changes to ensure inclusivity and fairness.

Conclusion:

Feminist epistemology provides a critical framework for analyzing how gender influences knowledge production. By emphasizing situated knowledge, it challenges the notion of objective, universal knowledge and highlights the importance of acknowledging diverse perspectives, particularly those of marginalized communities. In the Indian and Assamese contexts, feminist epistemology plays a crucial role in critiquing patriarchal knowledge systems and advocating for epistemic justice. By recognizing the significance of gendered

experiences in shaping knowledge, it offers an alternative model of objectivity that values inclusivity, diversity, and the lived realities of different social groups.

The outcomes of this study suggest that feminist epistemology has profound implications for academia, professional settings, and social structures. Acknowledging that knowledge is shaped by gender and socio-cultural contexts enables the development of more inclusive knowledge production systems that challenge existing biases. This research supports the idea that incorporating feminist epistemological insights into mainstream discourse can transform traditional institutions, making them more representative of diverse perspectives. Additionally, feminist epistemology contributes to broader discussions on social justice by emphasizing the voices of those historically excluded from knowledge production. In the Indian and Assamese contexts, recognizing the knowledge systems of women strengthens epistemic diversity and ensures that dominant narratives are challenged. As a result, feminist epistemology not only critiques the past but also provides a roadmap for a more equitable and just future.

Through its emphasis on situated knowledge, feminist epistemology reveals how social hierarchies shape knowledge systems. By addressing gender biases in academic, professional, and cultural contexts, feminist epistemology plays a transformative role in reshaping knowledge production. The integration of feminist epistemological insights into mainstream discourse is essential for promoting a more equitable and just society, both within India and beyond.

References:

1. Anderson, E. (2012). How Not to Criticize Feminist Epistemology: a Review of Scrutinizing Feminist Epistemology. Retrieved from <https://websites.umich.edu/~eandersn/hownotreview.html>
2. Anderson, E. (2000). Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/feminism-epistemology/>.
3. Anderson, E. (Spring 2017). Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology>.
4. Anderson, E. (2015). Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2015 Edition). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/feminism-epistemology/>
5. Bhattacharyya, R. (2009), Examining the Changing Status and Role of Middle-Class Assamese Women: Lessons from the Lives of University Students. University of Newcastle. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.3657.9683
6. Brooker, J. (2002). Feminist Epistemology: The Foundation of Feminist Research and its Distinction from Traditional Research, *Advancing Women in Leadership*.

Retrieved

from

<https://advancingwomen.com/awl/spring2002/ARDOV~CG.HTM>

7. Crawford, M and Marecek, J. (1989). *Feminist Theory, Feminist Psychology: A Bibliography of Epistemology, Critical Analysis, and Applications*. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 13(4), pp.477-491.
8. Dyhouse, C. (2010). *Glamour Women, History, Feminism*. London & New York: Zed Books.
9. Grasswick, H. (2011). *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*. Springer.
10. Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), 575-599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
11. Harding, S. (1987). *Feminism and methodology: Social science issues*. Indiana University Press.
12. Jha, P. and Nagar, N. (2015). A Study of Gender Inequality in India. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, pp. 46-53.
13. Longino, H., & Lennon, K. (1997). *Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology*. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 71, 19-54. Retrieved June 4, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106954>
14. Mehrotra, D. (2017), *Feminist and Gender-Based Research, Unit 1- Epistemology and Gender-Based analysis*, IGNOU, pp.12-14.
15. Newman, L. (2019). *Descartes' epistemology*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition). Stanford University. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/descartes-epistemology/>
16. Nya, A. (2004). *Feminism and Modern Philosophy: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
17. Pookkat, F. (2011). *Reflections on the Feminist Interventions in Revised Knowledge Analyses*.
18. Saharia, S. (2021). *Feminist Consciousness in Assamese Poetry*. *Journal of Xi'an University of Architecture & Technology*. Volume XIII, Issue 3, pp.216-225.
19. Sahin, N. (2016). *Communities and Cultures of Women: A Study of Neighborhood Groups and Gated Communities in Assam*. *Space and Culture, India*, Vol. 4 No. 2.
20. Yadav, A. (2018). *Epistemology Revisited: A Feminist Critique*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 19, Issue. 6.