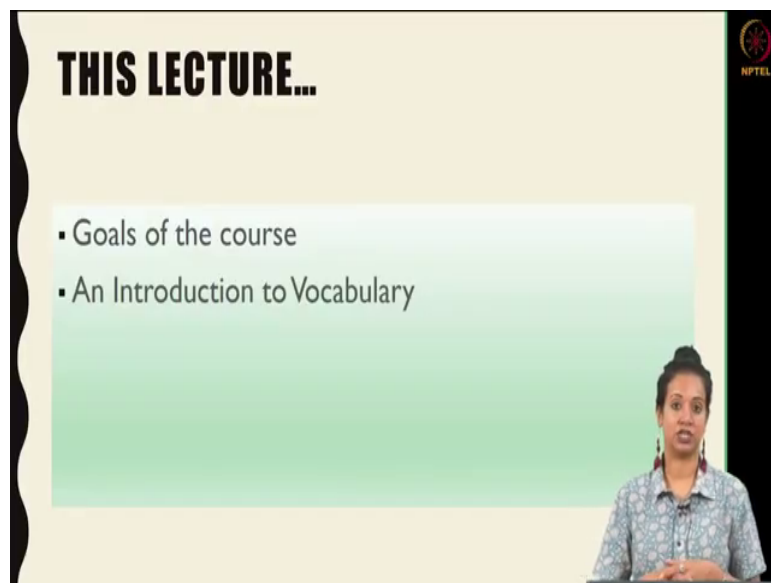


Feminism Concepts and Theories
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Introduction

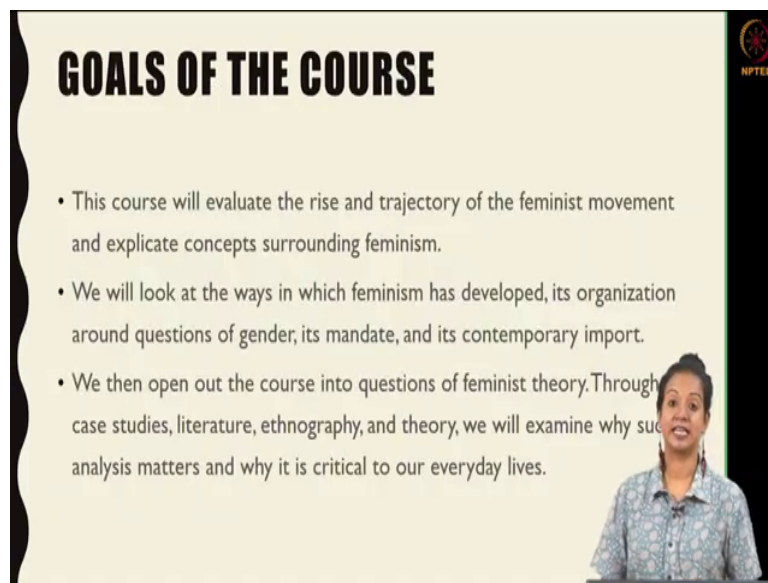
Hello and welcome. So apparently this is the first lecture for Feminism Concepts and Theories, so let us get started without further ado. First lectures are exciting because you get to lay down the rules, set the ground and figure out a set of expectations so that you all can make a plan for how is it that you want to go ahead with this course.

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In today's lecture I am merely going to be doing a couple of very simple things. I want to clearly set out the goals for this course which is, what are the ways in which I want the course to fulfil certain questions that I myself have about Feminism Concepts and Theories. 2 – I want to give you an introduction to what we term as vocabulary. Now, of course, this might seem a little confusing, ostensibly this course is in English and therefore one should not need an introduction but I will come to the reasons why this may not be the case.

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GOALS OF THE COURSE

- This course will evaluate the rise and trajectory of the feminist movement and explicate concepts surrounding feminism.
- We will look at the ways in which feminism has developed, its organization around questions of gender, its mandate, and its contemporary import.
- We then open out the course into questions of feminist theory. Through case studies, literature, ethnography, and theory, we will examine why such analysis matters and why it is critical to our everyday lives.

NIPTEL

Let us get started. What are the goals of the course? And all of you have seen the initial sheet that is online, so I am just going to be repeating some of it. But, I want you to pay attention and take care in making sure that you read what you thought you read. This course will evaluate the rise and trajectory of the feminist movement and explicate concepts surrounding feminism. Now, this is important to know because while we are locating this squarely in the feminist movement or what we consider a historical rise in the understanding of feminism, we are also interested conceptually in what surrounds it.

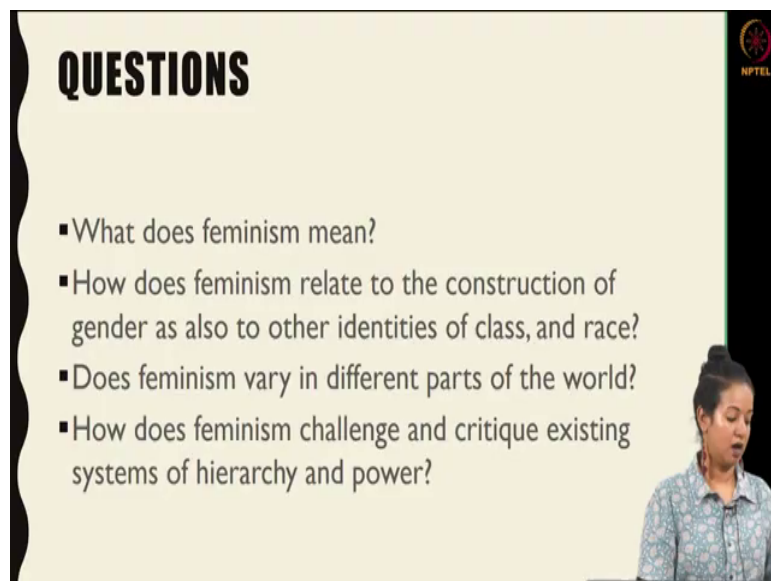
And this is true of all social movements. They borrow from social energies, they are located in society, so conceptually we are all partaking in a similar pool of conceptual understanding and this is very important for the social sciences because it means that no matter what you are studying, we are all invested in similar questions of improvement and change. 2 – We will look at the ways in which feminism has developed its organization around questions of gender, its mandate, and its contemporary import.

Now, those of you who have seen the introductory video you know that I placed a lot of emphases on this concept of gender and we will be coming back to it again and again during the course of the few weeks that we are spending together. But, in this set of courses we are looking at the ways in which feminism has developed, meaning it did start in particular geographies with certain goals in mind and then it has sort of built upon these goals often in fragmented, often in differential fashion.

What is its contemporary import is something that should very clearly appeal to you because in many ways theories have been accused of not being relevant, of being jargonized, of particular ways of being that exist only in text and not in the world and so for this cause I am very invested in this question of – what is the contemporary importance of something seemingly as eclectic as feminism? Lastly, for the last few weeks we open out the course into questions of feminist theory.

Now, this is something that I am very clearly invested in, which is the idea that of course feminism by itself is greatly interesting. However, what does it mean when we talk about it as feminist theory? Does theory have a point of view? Does it enter into questions with certain questions and concerns in mind? What is its relevance in looking at the world, through case studies, literature, ethnography, and theory? We examine why such analysis matters, why it is critical to our everyday lives. And this is something I will come back to again and again during the time that we are talking which is everyday life. Why does theory matter in the ways in which we lead our everyday lives?

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QUESTIONS

- What does feminism mean?
- How does feminism relate to the construction of gender as also to other identities of class, and race?
- Does feminism vary in different parts of the world?
- How does feminism challenge and critique existing systems of hierarchy and power?

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Let us start then with the questions that will underline all of our sessions. The first one, very important, what does feminism mean? What does it even mean? And no two people will give you a similar answer. It could mean entirely different things to different sets of people depending on where they themselves are located in life, age, caste, class, gender and the ways in which they have engaged with it and the questions that matter to them. 2 - How does

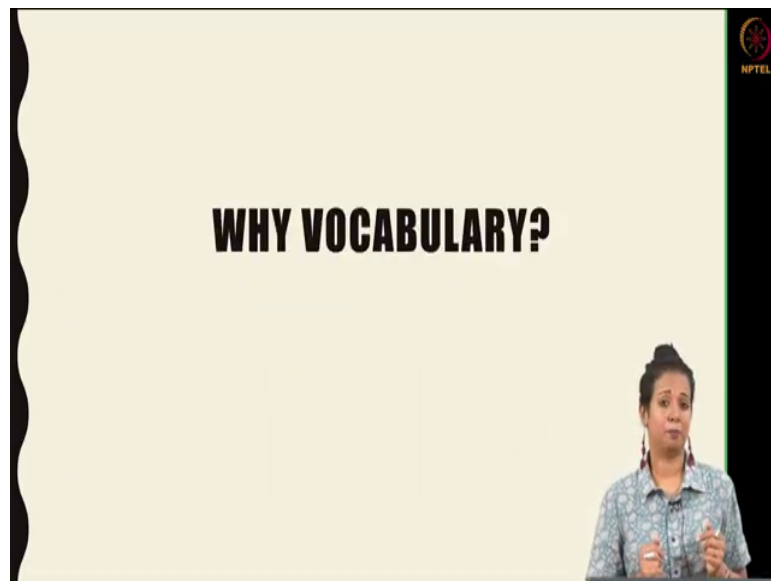
feminism relate to the construction of gender as also to other identities of class and race and caste in all parts of the world?

Now, this is really important because here we are sure that while feminism's reason for existing as theory is gender, there are other kinds of identities that matter as much in the world; it is not a hierarchy. Meaning, just because something is constructed along the lines of gender does not mean that it will not be intersected by other concerns related to class and race. And we will come to that soon enough, so if it is not entirely clear to you hang on to that thought. 3 – Does feminism vary in different parts of the world?

Now, this is a truly important question because it relates to one of the central concerns of social theory itself. Is there a set of universal questions that theory should be equipped to handle? Meaning, does gender matter in the same way in all parts of the world? Must there be some kind of relativism in understanding how it operates in one part of the world as opposed to another? And, how do we dismantle hierarchy? Meaning, how do we evaluate gender relations in one part of the world as not being necessarily superior to others? How do we evaluate gender through internal coherence? Depending on the phenomenon we analyse.

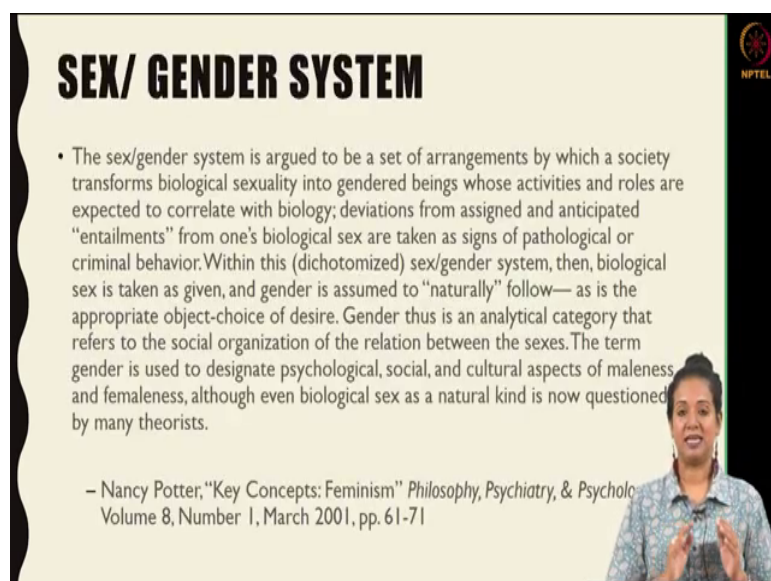
And lastly very important – How does feminism challenge and critic existing systems of hierarchy and power? Now, many people might vary in their understanding of whether this matters or not, but feminism is very clear about it. It is invested in gender in order to be able to subvert existing systems of power and by that we mean particular terms such as patriarchy. I will also come to that soon enough and I hope this has been a suitable introduction to understanding why although this is an introductory course, the concepts we are examining are not simple.

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Really important question – Why would I want to introduce you to vocabulary? Surely we participate in the same linguistic world of English, what does vocabulary mean over here?

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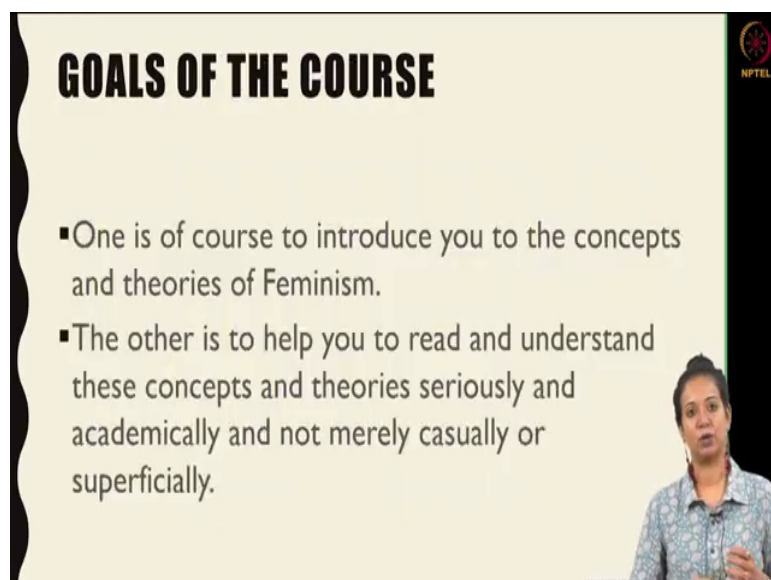
Let me give you a really important example, so what you see on the slide is something called the sex gender system which is at the heart of a lot of a feminist theory. This is an extract from Nancy Potter's "Key Concepts in Feminism" from the journal *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* from 2001. I am going to read it out very slowly through which you will probably understand what I mean when I say you might need some sort of hand holding in

terms of vocabulary or an introduction. Before we can agree on what something means when I said in this class.

The sex gender system is argued to be a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into gendered beings whose activities and roles are expected to correlate with biology. Deviations from assigned and anticipated “entailments” from one’s biological sex are taken as signs of pathological or criminal behaviour. Now, I will assure you that the sentence is actually much simpler than it seems when you hear it first. Within this dichotomized sex gender system, then, biological sex is taken as given, and gender is assumed to naturally follow as is the appropriate object-choice of desire.

Gender thus is an analytical category that refers to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes. The term gender is used to designate psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness, although even biological sex as a natural kind is now questioned by many theories. So, what is it that you can actually understand at first go? That we are talking about something that is clearly a system in which sex and gender mean different things although often they are considered to work together. Beyond this in order to understand what the compelling force of this argument is, we will have to wait for a little bit, so there is a little teaser.

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GOALS OF THE COURSE

- One is of course to introduce you to the concepts and theories of Feminism.
- The other is to help you to read and understand these concepts and theories seriously and academically and not merely casually or superficially.

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So, then we return to the goals of the cause in relation to conceptual understanding. So one goal of the course is to introduce you to concepts and theories as we name them, sex gender system being one of them. The other is to help you to read and understand these consistent

theories seriously and academically and not merely casually or superficially. And here is an important distinction, the way that we use certain words within feminist theory may not be intuitive, they may not strike you in the same fashion as a literal understanding of the words will and this is something important to understand.

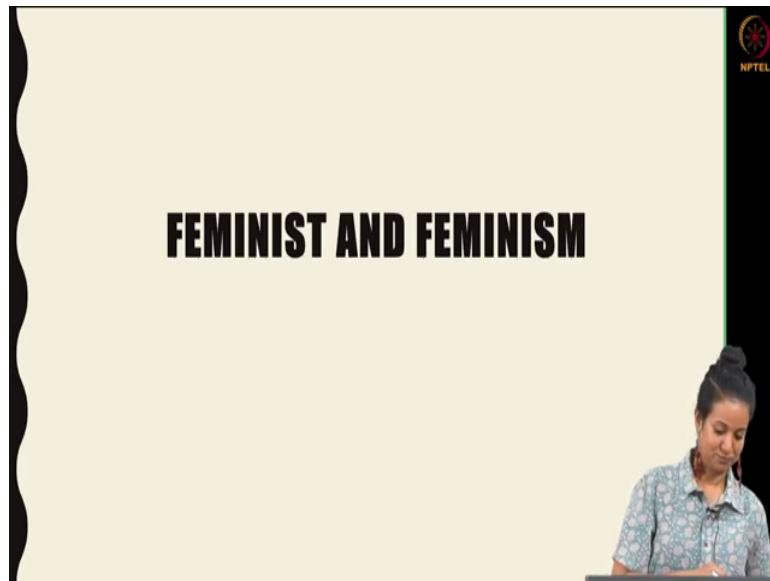
Much like all disciplines have a technical vocabulary, we also have a conceptual vocabulary, and it is important not to mix literal and conceptual definitions. While conceptually it borrows from the literal understanding, it also expands upon it and makes it much more precise so that we can build our theories of the world in a rigorous fashion.

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So, then let us get started with one of the most important sets of words in this course Feminist and Feminism.

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So, let me then ask you, what do the words bring to mind? And depending on who I am asking this might well be a really dangerous question. What do the words bring to mind? And I would recommend that you perform may be a minute-long exercise where you note down this things. Make a list of words that you associate with feminism. Against each of the words write down who is likely to utter those words. Are they coming from you, from people around you, from people that are in your mind as caricatures or stereotypes?

Lastly, how do those associations locate women in the world? And by this I mean how do they locate women in terms of how we understand? What women are like? Typically, stereotypically, terms of caricature what have you? And once you perform the exercise, I want you to locate those words in relation to some of these artefacts from popular culture that I am now bringing to you. For example, these are things that I pulled off the worldwide web when I went looking for feminist memes.

Exhibit A from a website calls stakeat.com that says, “All men are pigs, women are equal to men.” Insert (12:34). Now, in this image you have the stereotypical rendition of the angry feminist. But here there is an additional stereotype, the feminist is not only angry, she is kind of stupid because she is been caught in her own trap. All men are pigs, women are equal to men, you do the math. Secondly, there is another meme which I pulled off memes.com/feminism. “There must be some way this victimises me: Feminism 101.

Now, 'Feminism 101' means an introduction to feminism which is what we are doing today. And supposedly according to this meme this course teaches people how to find ways in which to declare themselves victims. Now, these are 2 very popular characterizations of feminism. One, as being about anger and the anger is misdirected, it is stupid, it has no object in the world, women just like to be angry and this is not very far from modernist definitions of historical feminists either.

Anger, uncontrolled, spilling over, having no rational capacity, we will talk about those very soon. The second, of course, is the understanding, that all feminism does is produce women as victims of a society, when all they need to do is pull themselves up by the bootstraps and get going and everything will be fine. I will take a deep breath now, but I will talk about all of these very soon. This is not to say that these are not contested or these are overwhelmingly the only kinds of characterizations of a woman. Feminism also deals with characterizations of men, so often the memes that hit back say something like this.

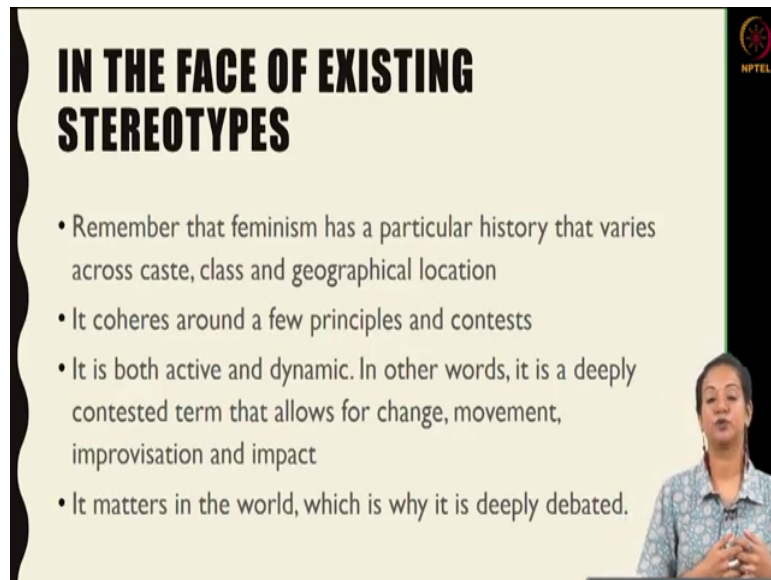
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And this is from a tumblr account called Decadenthumor. And you can see this little bit a dialogue between men and women. Women are very hard to read, actually we just want, such complex creatures, if you just listen, so mysterious. Here, you see the reproduction of 2 kinds of stereotypes, what they call mansplainers (())(14:47)? Men who explain things to women and women who are trying hesitantly to get a word in edge wise, do not have confidence, and stereotype number 3, women are just mysterious complex creatures, you cannot not explain them. No man can explain a woman.

All of these, while important to feminism, they are side projects, they are things that are the material of feminist theory that will help us understand how these things operate in the world. So, these are really important for you to start paying attention to. We have a separate week on popular culture itself but until then I will keep introducing it in the lectures as well.

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IN THE FACE OF EXISTING STEREOTYPES

- Remember that feminism has a particular history that varies across caste, class and geographical location
- It coheres around a few principles and contests
- It is both active and dynamic. In other words, it is a deeply contested term that allows for change, movement, improvisation and impact
- It matters in the world, which is why it is deeply debated.

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Therefore, in the face of existing stereotypes in so much overwhelming opinionated material on feminism and feminists, please, remember the following: Feminism has a particular history that varies across caste, class and geographical location, I should also add ‘race’ into this mix. It coheres around a few principals and contests. Principals, yes, we’ll come to them but also there are contestations around what gender means, how it should operate and people are very invested in these battles.

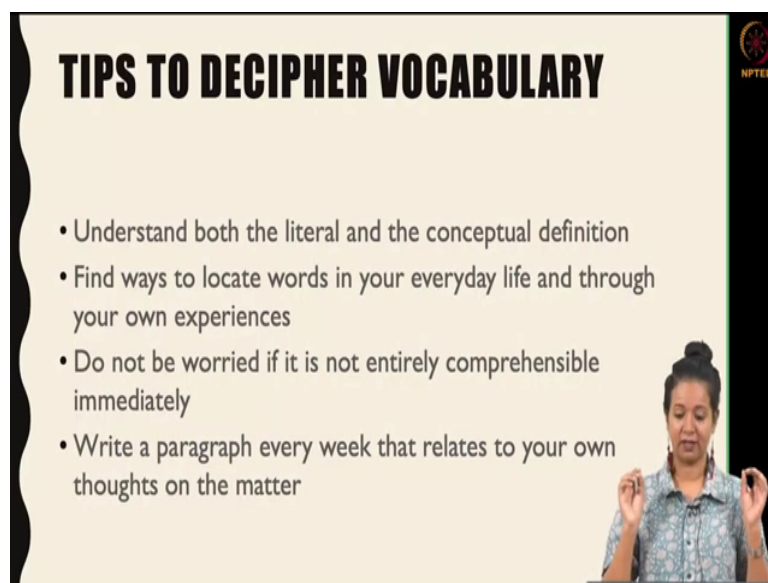
Third, Feminism is both active and dynamic; in other words, it is a deeply contested term that allows for change, movement, improvisation and impact. Feminist and Feminism are not terms that have not changed over decades. They have difference sets of meanings depending on the time and place that you are speaking about them in. Needless to add, this class is concerned with this time and place but we will also take a number of comparative examples to give you a sense of what the landscape of feminist theory looks like.

Lastly and I cannot emphasise this more, it matters in the world which is why it is deeply debated. Go back to the first set of questions where we said, how does it affect power relations? Changes in the way feminist theory operates in the world also affects changes in

the ways that people operate and thereby, people have greatly heated opinions about feminist and feminism.

Now, that I have given you so much to think about I hope this lays ground for what is coming henceforth. So, in the next lecture we will be occupied with words, just singular words that I will explicate historically, specifically and conceptually so until next time please do your work. Please try and make sure that you understand what we are talking about and I look forward to more.

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TIPS TO DECIPHER VOCABULARY

- Understand both the literal and the conceptual definition
- Find ways to locate words in your everyday life and through your own experiences
- Do not be worried if it is not entirely comprehensible immediately
- Write a paragraph every week that relates to your own thoughts on the matter

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Couple of tips to decipher such vocabulary. Understand both the literal and the conceptual definition, do both. Find ways to locate words in your everyday life and through your own experiences, and this is very important because with theory it runs the risk of being very dry and boring and you have to be able to use it as a lens to understand your own life. Do not be worried if it is not entirely comprehensible immediately. And I will say this again and again, things take time.

Lastly, try and do this. Write a paragraph every week along with your assignment that relates to your own thoughts on the matter, like a journal entry because then it will make it personal, sort of reflecting the feminist idea that the personal is political. Thank you very much for your attention until next lecture.