

**“What is the difference between your response to Marilyn Strathern on feminist anthropology and Janaki Nair’s response?”**

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*Abstract.* Marilyn Strathern argues against the possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in social anthropology. In an earlier paper, my interpretation of Strathern’s argument, or one of them, is similar to Janaki Nair’s response in broad outline. But it is different in detail and I also object to Strathern’s argument, whereas Nair endorses the argument she extracts. Here I identify differences and I object to the Nair-Strathern argument as well.

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In her paper “An Awkward Relationship: the Case of Feminism and Anthropology,” Marilyn Strathern argues against the possibility of feminist research bringing about a paradigm shift in social anthropology. I published a response in 2012 and placed a revised version on *PhilPapers* in 2020. In both, I identify three arguments that she makes. One of these arguments, put simply, is that there are no paradigms in anthropology to shift. I object to this argument. My interpretation of this argument is similar to Janaki Nair’s interpretation of it in 2008, writing in *Economic and Political Weekly*. But the interpretations are actually different in a number of ways and I am also not convinced by the Nair-Strathern argument at present. Below I track some of the differences in interpretation and then evaluate Nair-Strathern.

**The no paradigms argument.** I characterized this above as one of Strathern's three arguments but counting these things is more difficult than it seems. There is a simple version of the no-paradigms argument and a more complex version.

*The simple version.* Anyone who studied anthropology from the 1980s onwards would have encountered a number of theoretical frameworks, such as functionalist anthropology, Marxist anthropology, psychoanalytic anthropology, and postmodern anthropology. An anthropologist doing fieldwork on a particular group might well write up their report in the form of a book, with a chapter early on which identifies the framework they are using (e.g. Munn 1986). Now the term "paradigm" comes from Thomas Kuhn's research on revolutions in the natural sciences (1996) and there is a question of how this research applies to the social sciences. A way of applying it is to say, "These theoretical frameworks are paradigms." But Strathern writes:

...one might get away with a commonsense understanding of paradigms as "basic conceptual frameworks and orienting assumptions of a body of knowledge." Yet one significant feature of the Kuhnian paradigm is that the scientists he studied become aware of paradigm shift only after the fact. (1987: 281)

She is saying that these frameworks are paradigms when a paradigm is understood as a set of orienting assumptions, but they are not paradigms in Kuhn's sense, which is more narrow. In Kuhn's sense (or Strathern's Kuhn's sense!), a paradigm is this: (i) a set of orienting assumptions; (ii) researchers who make the assumptions are not aware of these assumptions until there is a crisis in their research program. Given these two qualities, we run into a problem with the answer that the labelled theoretical frameworks are paradigms. We know about them and, furthermore, we know assumptions that distinguish one of these frameworks

from another, e.g. Marxist anthropology assumes a grand narrative to history and postmodern anthropology assumes no grand narrative. Strathern thus writes:

the different theoretical positions occupied in the social sciences are not analogous to the paradigms of Kuhnian science. They are based on overt conflict between competitive conceptual frameworks which cannot be reduced to single positions... (1987: 286)

So far I am rehearsing material from my earlier paper, but I would like to add that this emphasis on being aware of the paradigm only when it is in crisis is repeated elsewhere in Strathern's writings (1991: 10; 1992: 3).

The material above reveals the simple version of the argument: feminist research cannot bring about a paradigm shift in social anthropology, because there would have to be paradigms to shift and the only plausible candidates for paradigms are these theoretical frameworks and they are not paradigms in the relevant sense, which is a Kuhnian sense.

*The complex version.* Strathern considers an objection to the simple argument (1987: 286). The objection is that there are some common assumptions to these different theoretical frameworks, though not essential to the discipline, but we are not aware of them and these assumptions qualify as a paradigm. Could not feminist research challenge those assumptions and thereby bring about a paradigm shift? Strathern's response in brief is that feminist researchers are unlikely to achieve awareness of the assumptions in order to shift them. In light of this response, her argument becomes more complex. Here it is: there are two plausible candidates for being a paradigm in social anthropology – these theoretical frameworks or some common, but dispensable, hidden assumptions of the frameworks – but regarding the first candidate, they do not actually qualify as paradigms, and regarding the

second, feminist research is unlikely to achieve the awareness of them needed to shift them.<sup>1</sup> It is somewhat misleading to call this “the no paradigms argument,” even the complex version, because there is no denial that the hidden assumptions are paradigms, but I do not have another neat label for it.

**Nair’s too programmatic argument.** This is what Nair says:

Here let us recall that feminism’s investment in history, worldwide, is linked to its desire to dismantle and transform persistent gender hierarchies in known historical epochs, and geographical spaces. This is why, as Marilyn Strathern (1987) has pointed out, it is inappropriate to use the term “paradigm” shift to describe the academic practice enabled by feminism, for the latter’s programmatic agenda makes it work towards and anticipate the transformation of practice, unlike the processes identified by Thomas Kuhn for the natural sciences. (2008: 58)

Nair’s interpretation shares with mine the core idea that Strathern is arguing that Kuhnian terminology is being misapplied. But there are at least three differences. Since Nair, as well as attributing an argument to Strathern, endorses it, I shall just call it “the Nair-Strathern argument,” when identifying these differences.

*Paradigms in anthropology?* The Nair-Strathern argument does not deny that there are paradigms in social anthropology, as the simple version of the no paradigms argument does, or even merely deny that the theoretical frameworks are paradigms, as both versions do. What it denies is that the kind of transformation feminism is seeking to bring about is appropriately described as a paradigm shift in a Kuhnian sense.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a question of what we interpret (or model) Strathern inferring from this unlikelihood: it can’t happen or it won’t happen or something else?

*The definition of paradigm.* Also the argument, as Nair interprets it, does not introduce a definition of what a paradigm is according to which researchers are unaware of the assumptions that constitute it prior to a crisis. She does not explicitly take a stand on this aware-or-not issue.

*Paradigm shift.* Nair introduces a conception of what is involved in a Kuhnian paradigm shift, which does not feature in my interpretation of Strathern. What is this conception? I am not sure in detail, but here is a guess. Stage 1: a research community is working with a paradigm, whether aware of it or not. Stage 2: a crisis occurs in which the paradigm seems doubtful. Community members do not have plans<sup>2</sup> regarding what should happen next: whether the doubts should be resolved in favour of the old paradigm or a new paradigm should take its place. Some people favour the old ways, others look for new solutions. Stage 3: enough people are attracted to a new solution, leading to the installation of a new paradigm within the research community.

A paradigm shift requires going through all three stages, for Nair (or Nair, as I understand her). But what Nair thinks is that feminist research differs at stage 2. Feminists have clear plans over what should happen next: “We are not going back to the old one. We are switching to this one!” So, she infers, what feminist research enables is not paradigm shift.

**Evaluation of Nair-Strathern.** Even if we grant Nair’s interpretation of Strathern’s argument, I don’t think it helps Strathern much. Firstly, it still allows for a revolutionary theoretical change in social anthropology caused by feminist research, even if one quibbles over whether to call this “Kuhnian paradigm shift,” when the ambition of Strathern’s paper is to show that such a revolutionary change cannot happen. In general, arguments which

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<sup>2</sup> This reference to the unplanned does not feature in my interpretation.

become very fussy about whether this a paradigm or a paradigm shift in a Kuhnian sense risk this outcome (see Edward 2020: 13-14). The anti-revolutionary spirit of Strathern's argument is lost, the spirit captured by this statement: "When brought into the open and compared, their proponents cannot possibly challenge each other." (Strathern 1987: 291) Secondly – and this is a new evaluative point – it is unclear that feminism research cannot or would not bring about a non-programmatic (i.e. unplanned) feminist theoretical revolution. Can feminists not be planning a feminist revolution of type A and end up with a feminist revolution of type B?! So you plan for a revolution in which future anthropology interprets the data as supporting liberal feminism wherever plausible; but you end up with a revolution in which the data is interpreted as supporting sex-segregation as the way forward for feminism wherever plausible! Liberal feminist revolutionaries bring about a crisis, but enough community members move towards this paradigm in stage 3, rather than the planned one.

As noted before, Nair endorses the argument she attributes to Strathern. She writes, "it is inappropriate to use the term 'paradigm' shift to describe the academic practice enabled by feminism." Perhaps the unplanned transformation just described does not exactly fit her narrower conception of what is involved in paradigm shift, but it is much closer because the eventual result was not planned. I think she overlooks this possibility.<sup>3</sup> Given her emphasis on paradigm shift as involving unplanned revolutionary theoretical change, it is unclear there is any good reason to exclude it.

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<sup>3</sup> Also, I think it likely that there were members of a scientific community in some natural science discipline who planned what would happen next at stage 2. The distinction between Kuhnian revolution in science and planned feminist revolution in social science is more difficult to maintain when you fill in the details.

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