

“Postcolonial Feminism: As a Recent Development in Literatures in English”

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ABSTRACT

There can be no definitive definition of feminism because feminist theorists are as large as the females. Feminism is stretching its boundaries to disturb the stereotypical imbibed value systems. Females are subjected to the culture of silence male ideology disdains their literary endeavours. Feminists critique the representation of women in literatures written by both males and females. They are unearthing and at the same time rewriting and also re-visioning the master narratives. Feminists reject the notion of objectivity and neutrality. They write from subjective positions informed by specific circumstances. History of modern feminism is divided into three waves: First-wave, Second-wave and third wave feminism. The basic premise of third-wave feminism is that western feminism cannot theorise for the Third-World Women. This very point gave birth to different strains of feminism- black feminism, Asian-American feminism, postcolonial feminism, Islamic feminism, Dalit feminism. Postcolonial feminism deals with the issues related to women from diverse national and cultural identities. It addresses the problems that have not been explored and questioned in the mainstream postcolonial theory and western feminism. Postcolonial feminism does not take women as a homogenous population, they celebrate differences. Various exponents of postcolonial feminism are Andre Lorde, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ethel Crowley, Leila Ahmad, Bama Faustina who voice the concerns of indigenous women.

Key Words : *Global south, Patriarchal, Postcolonial feminism, Re-visioning, Weltanschauung.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In daily parlance feminism may be defined as the wide range of political and social movements with underlying common goal of equality of sexes .One cannot construct the definitive definition of feminism because feminist theorist are as large as the females. It is stretching the boundaries to disturb the received values. Feminism is plural in nature and international in scope. Feminism is a political perception based on two fundamental premises;

a) Gender difference is foundation of the structural inequality between men and women by which women suffer systematic social injustice.

b) That the inequality between sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construct of gender differences. This provides feminism its double agenda. Sex refers to biological identity while gender connotes the cultural meaning which is attached to biological identity. This cultural conditioning is transferred from generation to generation.

Females are subjected to silence male ideology scorns their literary endeavours. Women have internalized the patriarchal ideology .Feminist theorists critique the representation of women in literature written by males as well as females. Therefore, feminist theorists try to take over canon and rescue it from patriarchy and helping

the readers to scan genres which were concealed to this time – lyrics, novels, short stories, memoirs etc .They are unearthing and at the same time rewriting it and also re-visioning the texts .Feminists rejects the notions of objectivity and neutrality. They write from subjective positions informed by specific circumstances. They believe that thought is not an abstract process, but is created by the “nature and situation” of the body in time and place. Feminists took the herculean task and intensified their efforts to deconstruct the social creations of gender in all areas of life. In a patriarchal society feminists had to overcome numerous impediments to prove their worth, they make a paradigm shift and observe the realities of life from different vantage point. Needless to say, resonance of this universal phenomenon of feminism is audible in all branches of literature. Andrienne Rich defines feminism as,

“the place where in the most natural, organic way subjectivity and politics have come together.”

Andrienne Rich in her essay, “When We the Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” emphasizes the need for re-visioning of old texts, with “fresh eyes” that develops a new form of writing which will present a true picture of female weltanschauung. Andrienne says,

“Untill we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destruction of male –dominated society.”

II. BRIEF HISTORY OF FEMINISM

The history of modern feminism is divided into three waves;

2.1 First- Wave - Feminism: The first wave of the feminist movement which according to Patricia Waugh dates from 1830- 1920 was primarily concerned with struggle for political and legal rights of women. This period was marked by the works of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).Wollstonecraft is called ‘ a hyena in a petticoat’ by Horace Walpole. In this treatise *Wollstonecraft* stresses on the education of women and financial independence for women .Another seminal work of this period is Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (1929).

2.2 Second Wave Feminism: Began in the early 1960s and 1970s addressed issues such as women’s employment, equal pay, role in the family and sexuality and removal of gender based discriminatory practices. Main works of this period are *The Second Sex* by Beauvoir *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millett . Kate Millett uses the premise, “the personal is political” to discuss the political nature of heterosexual relationships. Helene Cixous writes in “ The Laugh of the Medusa”

“Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ... women must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history-by her own movement.”

2.3 Third Wave Feminism: Began in the 1980s, in tandem with many other racially focused feminist movements. Its basic premise is that western women cannot theorise for the global south women. This gave birth to black feminism, lesbian feminism, Asian-American feminism, postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism, Islamic feminism and postmodern feminism.

Third wave feminists acknowledge and endorse individualism and diversity and sought to redefine what it meant to be a feminist. Some of the exponents of third wave are Rebecca Walker (daughter of the novelist and second waver Alice Walker) Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards. Influenced by the postmodernist movement in

the academy, third wave feminists sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words and media that had given ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, femininity, and masculinity etc.

III. POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

Postcolonial feminism emerged as part of the third wave of feminism which emerged in response to the question – can there be a possible feminism for all women on this planet. Postcolonial feminism deals with the issues related to women from diverse national and cultural identities. It mainly addresses the issues that have not been explored and questioned in the mainstream postcolonial theory and western feminism. Postcolonial feminists argue that western feminism cannot theorise for the third world women. Mainstream feminism tends to ignore the differences- of religion, culture, ethnicity and race. Cultural differences are generally looked down upon by western women, which are legitimate cultural practices. Postcolonial feminism questions and interrogates the authority and authenticity of the western feminist claims of representing or ‘speaking for’ all women.

Postcolonial feminism has strong ties with black feminism, Islamic feminism. Andre Lorde in her article “Age, Race, Class and Sex: women Redefining Difference” points out,

“As white ignore their built-in privilege and define woman in terms of their own experience alone then women of color become ‘other’...”

Postcolonial feminism does not take women as a homogeneous population, they address the differences-in race, sexual preference, class and even age. In Audre Lorde seminal work regarding postcolonial feminism “The Master’s Tools will never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984). Speaking of her experience as a black lesbian feminist she castigates feminist academia for its white bias. She stresses to embrace differences. She writes,

“Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone...It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.”

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay “French Feminism in an International Frame” (1981) critiques the French feminist Julia Kristeva and calls her as a prime example of sanctioned ignorance for her writing a book called *About Chinese Women*. In this essay she rejects the tendency of western feminists to intervene and interpret the experiences of global south women from their vantage subject position. Spivak gave the concept of ‘strategic essentialism’. She argues that shifting of the focus from the issue of sexual difference to the reality of cultural difference between the women of the ‘Third World’ and those of the ‘First World’ is needed.

Another postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty the distinguished professor of women’s and Gender studies in her essay “Under Western Eyes” critiques the political projection of western feminism and its construction of global south women as victimized stereotypes and oppressed lot, whom they must save. She states,

“The relationship between ‘woman’- a cultural and ideological composite other

Constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)- and ‘women’- real material subjects of their collective histories –is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address”.

In her book *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) Mohanty argues for bridging of the personal and the political. She calls for a transnational female solidarity as a strategy to acquire economic, political and racial stability. She writes

“Growing up in India, I am Indian, teaching high school in Nigeria, I am a foreigner...

Doing research in London, I was a black .As a professor alien” with an Indian passport.”

Ethel Crowley professor of sociology at Trinity College writes in her essay “Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism” about the inadequacies of the western feminism. She says that western feminism isolates and marginalises the experiences of many third world women. Indigenous feminisms exist throughout the global south. Leila Ahmad in her work *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) argues that the oppression and misery of women in the Middle East is caused by the patriarchal interpretations of Islam rather than Islam itself. She points out,

“The peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always found part of the western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam.”

Dalit feminism see dalit women doubly marginalised, first by the brahminical patriarchy and second by the patriarchal exploitation perpetrated by dalit men. Gopal Guru terms Dalit feminism as a ‘politics of difference’. Bama Faustina is a celebrated Dalit woman writer. She focuses on caste and gender discrimination and celebrates the inner strength of the subaltern women. Bama dreams of the oppressed dalit community getting united and fighting for their rights as the blacks did in America.

VI. CONCLUSION

West has always portrayed veil of Muslim women as an oppression and impediment to progress .Media has started a discourse about bikini and burkini. Bikini stands for emancipation of women and burkini stands for oppression and subjugation of women. western standards of freedom for women do not hold good for Muslim women Western feminism is throwing open everything. They over stated things like overthrowing men. In Islam we are very much rooted. Western feminist Essentialism theory can never satisfy all the cultures. Because different cultures have different objectives and aims. A single theory will not be accepted across the globe. As if it were a multinational product which could be sold everywhere. A totalising narrative is the need of the hour which will bring everything /everyone under its discourse.

Ajaz Ahmad, a postcolonial critic is of the view that women must reshape the academia which is shaped by patriarchal mindset. Feminism should speak for humanity and should not become another class, which will replace one tyranny by the other. Feminism should give a right perspective. Feminism should not only talk of suffering all the time but should be active agents of change per se. The interests and experiences of women from marginalised groups should be highlighted and dealt with. The complex history, variety and subject position of the global south women is to be considered and given due cognizance. Feminists don't deny the biological differences between men and women; in fact they celebrate those differences. Feminists are now aware that role of Cinderella, which patriarchy imposes on the fragile minds of young girls , performs a destructive function because it equates femininity with meekness and submission and encourages women to tolerate all sorts of behaviours. Women internalize the idea that bearing everything patiently will be rewarded by coming of a prince charming in their lives. Feminism is now broad-based and all inclusive. It is not now restricted to white, middle-class, educated women. It addresses the diversity and differences in culture, colour, race, ethnicity, caste

and sexuality. Estelle B. Freedman, in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of women*, defines feminism as a social, cultural, political and personal movement for freedom and equality:

“Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies.”

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