

Feminism: Theory and Praxis by Dr. Nazneen Khan

Abstract

Although the status of woman in society has differed from culture to culture, from country to country and from age to age and in many societies and cultures, as in Indian culture, she has been given a high place, at least theoretically, one feature common to almost all the patriarchal societies is that woman was always considered inferior to man and was excluded from all centres of power. An increasing awareness of the injustices done to women gradually gave rise to the feminist movement wherein the women raised their voice against marginalizations and patriarchal oppressions. The concept of feminism has changed the social, cultural, psychological and literary spheres of life in the modern age. Feminism, in its basic connotation, implies the assertion of female identity but varied points of view and ideologies have made it not only a sophisticated discourse but also a complicated one. Whatever the approach or ideology of various feminists and consequently of theorists, one thing that stands is that feminism focuses on women, and the problematics of women's oppression in patriarchy, sexual colonialism, sexual politics and her marginalization, loss of identity, her freedom and the suppression of her point of view. Feminism not only influenced real life and culture but also creative literature, literary theory and criticism. Feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It encompasses works in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art, history, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Like any other theory, feminist theory attempts to formulate general or universal explanation of women's oppression by using systematic analytic method. Feminism in Indian literature, particularly in Indian English writing, is a by-product of western feminist movement. The last few decades are marked by a new genre of writing by women, for women and about women. In their writings there is a prominence of the female point of view registering its disgust at the male chauvinism and its dissatisfaction with what it considers an unfair and oppressive patriarchal system. These feminist writers, through their writing, intend to deconstruct all the indefinite identities of women opposing the binary oppositions between the male and the female. This paper attempts to explore the basic aspects of feminism as a theory and its implementation in contemporary literary works.

Feminism: Theory and Praxis

Although the status of woman in society has differed from culture to culture, from country to country and from age to age and in many societies and cultures, as in Indian culture, she has been given a high place, at least theoretically, one feature common to almost all the patriarchal societies is that woman was always considered inferior to man and was excluded from all centres of power. Her sphere was severely restricted to the familial roles and, as Mary Ann Fergosson says, "in every age women have been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object-their

roles in relationship to men” (Fergusson 4-5). Roles outside this i.e., woman as an achiever, as a leader or as a strong individual are, by and large, either non-existent or rare. They are also exceptions and represent the extraordinary types and not the average ones. Sushila Singh aptly remarks:

Human experience, for centuries, has been synonymous with masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his life or his fantasy life. (Singh 7)

A character in *The Golden Notebook*, a novel by Doris Lessing, says, “The Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution they are nothing. The real revolution is women against men”. (Lessing 88). The question arises as to why women who represent half of the humanity at any given time and who, according to Juliet Mitchell, represent “the index of human advance” (Mitchell and Oakley 379) are against men. The answer requires a historically grounded enquiry based on patriarchy, sexism, sexual politics, sexual colonialism and phallogocentric approach in all walks of life since times immemorial.

Questions regarding women’s subordination have played an important role in the history of Western intellectual thought. The two most influential philosophers, both in the Greco-Roman world into which Christianity was born and in the world of Christian theology of the Middle Ages, were Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s attitude to women was ambivalent. While in some of his writings he advocated a fairer deal for women, in others, he ascribed the inferior status of women clearly to a degeneration from perfect human nature. Julia Annas in her article “Plato’s Republic and Feminism” quotes Plato in the following words:

It is only males who are created directly by the gods and are given souls. Those who live rightly return to the stars, but those who are cowards or lead unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation. This downward progress may continue through successive reincarnations unless reversed. In this situation, obviously it is only men who are complete human beings and can hope for ultimate fulfilment; the best a woman can hope for is to become a man. (Gould and Wortofsky 33)

For both Aristotle and his follower, St. Thomas Aquinas, writing during the middle ages, woman’s subordinate position in society follows from her nature which is inferior to that of the man. Aristotle regards woman as “*Tota mulier in utero*” i.e., ‘woman is a womb’ and points out that the ovaries of the woman imprison her in her subjectivity.

According to Rousseau, the champion of liberty during the French Revolution, women’s subordinate position in society springs from a natural fact-that women become mothers. Because only the females of the species give birth they should be subordinated to men in all matters in society, specially with regard to their sexuality. Rousseau says:

The mutual duties of the two sexes are not, and cannot be, equally binding on both. Women do wrong to complain of the inequality of man-made laws; this inequality is not of man's making, or at any rate it is not the result of mere prejudice, but of reason. She, to whom nature has entrusted the care of the children, must hold herself responsible for them to their father . . . Vague assertions as to the equality of the sexes and the similarity of their duty are only empty words; they are no answer to my argument. (Ruth 117-118)

Regarding the purpose of education of women, Rousseau gives this prescription:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honoured by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet and agreeable to them - these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught to them from their infancy. (Ruth 74)

The male-centred view of human life, which goes on to privilege one gender over another, has led to an inability to work towards a holistic development. Women have struggled both for a visibility and a voice - a visibility in terms of being seen and counted to participate and share. An increasing awareness of the injustices done to women gradually gave rise to the feminist movement wherein the women raised their voice against marginalizations and patriarchal oppressions. A close scrutiny of the genesis of feminism - women's voice against injustice and inequality - tends to unravel the fact that feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by men to suit their needs and interests regardless of woman's basic needs and happiness.

Feminism sets forth the belief that men have controlled and created history, politics and culture, and in so doing have "relegated women as women to the margins of culture, if not to silence and invisibility". (Benstock 147). Linda Gordon defines feminism as "an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it". (Singh 8).

The concept of feminism has changed the social, cultural, psychological and literary spheres of life in the modern age. Feminism, in its basic connotation, implies the assertion of female identity but varied points of view and ideologies have made it not only a sophisticated discourse but also a complicated one. For one thing, it has become fashionable to talk of feminism-there is, for instance, British feminism, American feminism, French feminism, Canadian feminism and now critics have started talking of Indian feminism basing their arguments on the correlations of gender, race and class. Within these broad classifications and wide cultural contexts, K.K. Ruthven, in his book *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (1984), has identified seven types of contemporary feminists: sociofeminists, who, study the social roles of women in literature; semiofeminists, who, look at how women are coded and classified as women (semiotics, being the study of signs or codes); psycho-feminists, who, focus on psychoanalytic and mythic theories of the feminine; Marxist feminists, who, view women first as members of the oppressed working class, socio-semio-psycho-feminists, who, combine the above approaches; Lesbian feminists, who, offer what they believe to be a distinctly feminine theory of

writing metaphorically based on the female body rather than the male; and black feminists, who, believe themselves triply oppressed as women, black and workers and who often attack the other feminist theorists and critics for centering their work on upper middle-class white women only. Ruthven also mentions poststructuralist antifeminist feminists who resist patriarchy by treating “the feminine” as an excluded “sign” rather than as something necessarily connected to women.

Among the important theorists of feminism (sometimes the term is applied retrospectively) whose work has been seminal are Mary Wollstonecraft, J.S. Mill, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Adrienne Rich, Susan Brownmiller, Mary Daly, Shulamith Firestone, Juliet Mitchell, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Sandra Lee Bartky, Linda Phelps, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Whatever the approach or ideology of various feminists and consequently of theorists, one thing that stands is that feminism focuses on women, and the problematics of women’s oppression in patriarchy, sexual colonialism, sexual politics and her marginalization, loss of identity, her freedom and the suppression of her point of view.

Feminism emerged in the seventeenth century as a political ideology and it was in favour of political and civil rights and opportunities such as right to education and equality. Mary Wollstonecraft, William Thomson, Anna Wheeler, J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill represented the early phase of liberal feminist point of view long before the word “feminism” in the sense of the “advocacy of the claims and rights of women” was used for the first time in 1895. Gradually, it spread across the world and the concept was widened to seek complete right for women-political, social, economic and educational. In the second half of the twentieth century it swept across the world making people think about the age-old beliefs from the newly awakened viewpoint. Feminism not only influenced real life and culture but also creative literature, literary theory and criticism.

Outlining the correlation between feminism and literature, Elaine Showalter, one of the seminal figures of the last quarter century of English feminist research, says:

Although feminism as a political ideology can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century, feminist literary criticism is a very recent invention ... Feminist criticism began when women, who were students, teachers, writers, editors, or simply readers, began to note the limited and secondary roles allotted to fictional heroines, women writers and female critics, and to ask serious questions about their own relation to literary study. How were women represented in men’s literary texts? What was the relationship between the textual harassment of women and the oppression of women in society? Why were women absent from literary history? If literature, as Roland Barthes has said, was ‘what gets taught’, was women’s writing, rarely taught, not ‘literature’? Was there a tradition of women’s writing, or an autonomous female aesthetic? And if one could talk about women’s writing, was ‘men’s writing’ also marked by gender? (Collier and Ryan 179)

Elaine Showalter studied the female literary tradition by going beyond Jane Austen, the Brontes and Eliot to look at a hundred and fifty or more of their sister novelists and saw patterns and phases in the evolution of a female tradition which correspond to the developmental phases of any sub-cultural art. In her book on English women novelists, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), she designated these three phases in the following manner:

1. The Feminine Phase (imitation of male writers, 1840-1880).
2. The Feminist Phase (Protest, 1880-1920).
3. The Female Phase (Phase of self-discovery-turning to the female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature - on going since 1920).

Like all politics, contemporary feminism has its roots in a political movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, which has been an active force for change since the late 1960s. In the words of Peter Barry:

The 'women's movement' of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions. These books include Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), which discusses male writers like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau; Olive Schreiner's Women and Labour (1911); Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929), which vividly portrays the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood; and Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949), which has an important section on the portrayal of women in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Male contributions to this tradition of feminist writing include John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women (1869) and The Origin of the Family (1884) by Friedrich Engels. (Barry 121)

The Second Sex (1949) by the French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir brought about a revolution and a sea-change in western society and can be rightly regarded as the true foundation of the present-day feminism. This radical book is a powerful and comprehensive critique of the age-old cultural belief in woman as simply "the negative object" and man as "the defining central subject" representing the entire humanity. With an unprecedented frankness, Simone de Beauvoir writes:

All agree in recognizing the fact that female exists in the human species, today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger, we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened

reality known as femininity. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination? (Beauvoir 13)

In the words of Patricia Waugh:

When the French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her 1949 book The Second Sex the famous sentence, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', she encapsulated an argument that would propel feminist thinking for the next fifty years or more. In one brief sentence, she touched upon questions and issues that lie at the very heart of feminist inquiry - questions as simple and complex as 'What is a woman?' In the attempt to address this question, feminism has become fractured, divided, and contradictory. It has also strengthened, developed, and evolved. (Waugh 319)

Feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It encompasses works in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art history, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Elaine Showalter describes the phased development of feminist theory. The first, she calls "feminist critique", in which the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena. The second, Showalter calls "gynocriticism", in which the woman is producer of textual meaning including "the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career and literary history." (Showalter 112). The last phase she calls "gender theory", in which the ideological inscription and the literary effects of the sex/ gender system" (Showalter 116) are explored.

Like any other theory, feminist theory attempts to formulate general or universal explanation of women's oppression by using systematic analytic method. The aim of feminist theory is, as Marilyn Frye says:

. . . discovering patterns, articulating them effectively, judging the strength and scope of patterns, properly locating the particulars of experience with reference to patterns, understanding the variance of experience from what we take to be a pattern. (Jagger and Rothenberg 108)

Feminist way of theorizing is not divorced or abstracted from women's daily life experience. Jackson and Jones observe:

Theory, for us, is not an abstract intellectual activity divorced from women's lives, but seeks to explain the condition under which those lives are lived. Developing this understanding has entailed looking at the material actualities of women's everyday experience and examining the ways in which we are represented and represent ourselves within a range of cultural practices, such as the art and the media. (Jackson and Jones 1)

Feminist theory seeks to use its theoretical knowledge to change women's social condition. Feminist theory is neither redundant nor an appendage to feminist political action; for understanding women's subordination in a rational and systematic way is a prerequisite to bringing about changes in women's lives and society in general. As Donavan says:

Women will remain trapped in age old patterns of enslavement and they will lose hard-won freedoms unless they learn and transmit their history. An important part of that history is the extensive body of feminist theory that has developed over the centuries. Women remain illiterate without a knowledge of that theory. (Donavan xi)

Feminist literary criticism offers new insights and readings of literature, reevaluating literary expressions both by women and men, documenting the impact of sexist assumptions on writers, challenging literary judgments that deny the female voice an equal role with the male. It has caused a major reorientation of values in literary studies by challenging the long held beliefs and practices. Feminist literary criticism, therefore, has two basic premises: one, 'woman' presented in literature by male writers from their own point of view and two, 'woman' presented in the writings of female writers from their own point of view. Feminists claim that literature and literary criticism, like all other spheres of human activity, bear the stamp of male domination. Feminist literary criticism is a mode of literary analysis which tries to interpret literature from the woman's point of view and introduces the notion of sexual difference into the study of literature.

The problem of conveying a personal vision of womanhood in their works without violating the current codes was a major obstacle encountered by the women writers of the past in India as well as abroad. However, today women writers enjoy a relatively greater freedom of expression and we find them handling various themes and exploring regions of experiences which were earlier strictly prohibited. Feminism in Indian literature, particularly in Indian English writing, is a by-product of western feminist movement. The Indian woman caught in the flux of tradition and modernity bearing the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future is the crux of feminism in Indian literature. Man-woman relationship has, on the whole, evolved through centuries on a set pattern- man to rule and woman to obey, man for the field and woman for the hearth. This centuries old, unquestioningly followed pattern of relationships now stands challenged, thanks to the feminist movement.

In the in the works of contemporary Indian women writing in English women are being revealed as rounded characters, both strong and vulnerable, which allows them to somehow emerge intact after a catharsis. They present pictures of determined women for whom the traditional role is inadequate, women who wish to affirm their independence and autonomy and are perfectly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities.

The last few decades are thus marked by a new genre of writing by women, for women and about women. What was just a beginning of mild feminism and protest in writers like Anita Desai has assumed a strident posture in avant-garde women writers like Shobha De, Kamla Das, Meena Alexander, Veena Paintal, Gita Mehta, Uma Vasudev, Namita Gokhale, Bharati

Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande who deal with women in a bolder manner. In their writings there is a prominence of the female point of view registering its disgust at the male chauvinism and its dissatisfaction with what it considers an unfair and oppressive patriarchal system. Through their writings, these women writers are trying to shatter the patriarchal hegemony and convey a positive vision of womanhood often by violating the current codes of conduct. These feminist writers, through their writing, intend to deconstruct all the indefinite identities of women opposing the binary oppositions between the male and the female. The society has cut a straight line between good and bad, white and black, light and dark, man and woman - contemporary feminist writers are against this distinction, this binary opposition.

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Author: Khurshid Alam

Publisher: Createspace

ISBN: 978-1499755718

Published Year: June 2014

Binding: Paperback

Pages: 68

Genre: Poetry

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