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FEMINIST STUDIES: CREATING NEW SPACES, PATTERNS AND PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Gender and the dynamics of power is one of the major concerns in the present socio-cultural perspective. Feminist studies, therefore, has emerged as a significant area of study and research to understand representations of culture and art. Programs in feminist studies focus on investigating the role of gender as a social construct, the paradigms of power in 'gendered' roles, the definitions and connotations of 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist', and identifying a feminist perspective. Feminist analysis is based on the assumption that gender is a crucial factor in the organization of our personal lives as well as our social institutions. Hence, it is imperative to understand feminist perspectives so as to re-interpret and re-evaluate the studies of cultures, individuals, policy, and other areas of scholarly inquiry. The present paper is an attempt to bring forth a historical paradigm of feminism as well as the theoretical bases that form the context of the feminist perspective. Therefore, the two major schools of feminism—American and French—are being taken up as formulating the framework of feminist ideology, followed by the concerns of Indian feminism and its differences from its Western counterpart.

Feminism, by bringing forth the perceptive and insightful thinking of intelligent women (as well as men), seeks new definitions of female identity. Avasthi and Srivastava put it succinctly :

Feminism is a politics, directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in the society. These power relations structure all areas of life—family, education and welfare, worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. (Introduction 11)

The major concerns of feminism, as Madsen points out, can be identified as “the unique experience of women in history; the notion of female consciousness; the definitions of gender that limit and oppress; and the cause of women's liberation from those restrictions.” (Preface ix) Tracing the historical contexts of American feminism, Madsen states that it was the hierarchical worldview of the Puritan colonists that determined the position of women in colonial America. “As men deferred to God and His ministers, so women should defer to men.”¹ The inferiority of women, according to the Puritans, was a mark of Original Sin and so in nineteenth century America, a woman was unable to vote, and after marriage had no control over her property or her children. “Her status was akin to that of a minor or a slave” (Madsen 3). And thus it was that the organised movement for women's rights had its origin in connection with slavery when the American abolitionist movement split over women's right to separate. The first wave of American feminism can be traced in the 1840s, marked by the first Women's Rights Conference,

held in Seneca Falls in 1848. Organised by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, the tone of the convention had been set by the efforts of Margaret Fuller whose plea for abolition of all intellectual and economic restrictions imposed for reasons of gender in her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) received an overwhelming response. The Seneca Falls convention marked the beginning of the political struggle for women's rights and led to the formation of National Woman's Suffrage Association founded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and the American Woman's Suffrage Association established by Lucy Stone; the two organisations merged in 1890 to become the National American Woman's Suffrage Association. However, it wasn't till 1920 that the Suffrage amendment to the constitution was made.

The second wave of American feminism emerged in the early 1960s; it focused upon "an indictment of male sexism and the domestic oppression of women" (Madsen 7). Its major concerns were the raising of women's consciousness of gender oppression as well as raising the personal experience of that oppression as a political issue. Friedan and Millet came to the fore as the most influential thinkers in the early stages of the second wave. Friedan points out that the core problem for women is "a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique" and that their "culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role" (68). Friedan's research on 'the image of woman' in the patriarchal society, to which all women try to conform, led her to infer that the one stereotype that the mystique always seeks to glamorize is that of "the happy housewife" (30).

Similarly, Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969)—a major text of the feminist canon—attributes the cause of women's oppression to patriarchy. According to Millet, power is exerted directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life, to constrain women. She borrows from social science the important distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' and explains how 'sex' is determined biologically while 'gender' is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. But patriarchy deliberately confuses the biological categories of 'male' and 'female' with those of gender, like masculine and feminine. This acting out of the roles in the unequal relation of domination and subordination is what she calls 'sexual politics'. Later, in the 1970s and 80s, the use of sexual violence by men as a strategy for sustaining patriarchal control over women rose prominently as a major feminist issue. Brownmiller's ground-breaking analysis of rape in *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) highlights the fact that all women are victimised by rape because the threat of rape is directed towards all women in patriarchal culture and as such, benefits all men in that culture. Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983) too brings out the commonality of female sexual exploitation.

The rise of the feminist theory in the areas of literary study, sociology, political theory, philosophy and history, thus becomes a notable landmark of the second wave feminism; early feminist theory, that developed from the Women's Liberation and Civil Rights movements, focused upon "points of continuity between the reading experience and personal experience (including family, society, networks of relationships, power structures, systems of value learned and lived and perpetuated in 'private' life)" (Madsen 15). Efforts to find and publish the work of neglected writers, accompanied by the theoretical exercises to define the nature of feminine experience, creativity, styles, genres and themes, can be traced in the major literary critics of the time such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Nina Baym, among others. In this context, Judith Fetterly's *The Resisting Reader* (1978) emerges as a major influential work that promotes a 'resisting' style of reading by questioning the definitions of 'universal' values and 'truth' as defined by male interests.

Contemporary American feminism is characterised by diversity, and the whole notion that a 'post-feminist' era has started, when the aims of the women's movement have been realised and further efforts to extend women's rights are not required. Faludi's study *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (1991), speaks of the contemporary 'backlash', which is her term for what others have termed 'post feminism'. Roiphe in *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1993) compares the feminism experienced by her mother in the early 1960s to her own encounter with feminism as dogma and infers that contemporary feminism is promoting an image of woman as a passive victim of male domination—the very image that early feminists sought to destroy. Another conspicuous strand of contemporary feminism is also found in the feminism of colour, highlighted in Davis' *Women, Race and Class* (1981), Hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* (1996) and Anzaldúa's *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras* (1990). These feminists of colour point to the emergence of Black Feminism, Chicana/Hispana Feminism, Native Feminism and Asian Feminism as distinct theoretical perspectives upon the oppression of women, with reference to the specifics of their racialised sexuality.

French feminism, an integral part of Western feminist theory, made its voice heard in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which is another canonical text in feminist literary discourse. De Beauvoir posits the fundamental question of feminine identity when she points out that woman defines herself by saying, "I am a woman." She further elaborates how man defines the human, not woman, and she shares only a lop-sided relationship with him. Man is the One, she the Other. Later, influential French feminists like Cixous, Kristeva and

Irigaray analyse how “a specific kind of writing, designated feminine (*écriture féminine*) subverts the linguistic and metaphysical conventions of Western discourse” and the feminine thus becomes “the symbol of otherness, alterity, the unconscious, the unspoken, the ‘Imaginary’ of Jacques Lacan’s revision of orthodox Freudian thought” (Madsen 19). French feminism of the 1980s, thus, is grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis, where the ‘feminine’ is a category of discourse, whose definition is constructed in language, philosophy, psycho-analysis and elsewhere. Hence, subconscious as well as the linguistic determinants of consciousness, are analysed psychoanalytically to discover the reasons for female oppression.

The discussion so far has focused on the overall concerns in feminist theory that have emerged, and continue to do so, in the Western tradition; there has been felt a need, however, to articulate the indigenous feminist issues as distinct from the Western experience. “Western notion of feminism is the outcome of the crisis precipitating in those societies” and “in different cultures, the tasks, powers and privileges, prescriptions and proscriptions are differently distributed between these domains” (Avasthi and Srivastava 16). That Western feminist discourse employs certain strategies to codify others as non-Western and themselves as Western is a point that Mohanty too brings out in his essay “Under Western eyes : Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” Rejecting the image of the ‘Third World Woman’ re-presented/ produced in the Western discourse, Mohanty refers to the ‘Third World Difference’ which characterizes the work of Western feminists regarding women in the third world. This ‘Third World Difference’, according to Mohanty, projects a picture of homogeneity of the oppression of the Third World Woman—a picture that does not take into count the relationship between ‘Woman’ as a cultural, ideological composite Other, and ‘women’ as real, individual subjects in their “collective histories” (260). Mohanty argues :

It is in this process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named...(260)

Hence, there emerges a pattern of power and domination on the part of Western feminism in the re-presentation of oppression, in a society where the forces as well as the consequences of oppression are in reality quite distinct from their Western counterparts. Mohanty identifies three “principles” that are used by the Western discourse to homogenize the Third World women : the assumption of woman as an already constituted group sharing identical interests, the usage of certain methodologies to universalize and validate cross-cultural relevance, and the politically loaded models of “power and struggle” used in the Western methodologies and analytic strategies, where the average third world woman is represented as having an “essentially truncated life based on her gender”, being sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, bound by tradition whereas Western women are (implicitly) represented as educated, modern and in control of their lives (261). Although women are bound together by the sociological concept of ‘sameness’ of oppression, yet this kind of homogeneity cannot be mistaken for the historically specific realities of women as separate groups. Western feminism, as Mohanty says, focuses not on analysing the specifications that mark particular groups of women in particular contexts as ‘powerless’ but on locating ‘powerless’ groups of women to prove that all women are powerless, as a homogenous, universally oppressed gender. Mohanty warns :

Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be formed in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis... (262)

Therefore, as Michelle Rosaldo states :

...woman’s place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions. (qtd. in Mohanty 263)

The above discussion highlights the significance of the critique of culture with relation to woman’s identity as a social being located in a specific cultural setting with its existing, dominant values and norms. Therefore, Indian feminism, so to speak, in order to study the feminist issues of its women, cannot look towards the West as a universal referent or norm. Women’s writing in India becomes a reflection of “Multiple subjectivities as well as their links with their material and ideological underpinnings” (Thapan 11) because texts are inseparable from their historical context of production and reception and eventually lead to a discourse of culture which finally has political connotations. The aesthetic of women’s texts “does not lessen discontinuity, dispossession or marginality, but dramatizes and clarifies it,” by delineating “how did they (women) tread their oblique paths across competing ideological grids, or obdurately hang on to illegitimate pleasures ? What forms did their dreams of integrity or selfhood take ?” (Tharu and Lalita 36). The concept of ‘selfhood’ and the female protagonist’s trials and tribulations in defining it, often in a nonconformist mode with reference to the prevalent patriarchal norms in themselves, becomes a major concern in locating a text in its specific historicity and culture. As Spivak states, a text does not exist in isolation but has to be read as “a literary form in its connections to what is being read : history, political economy—the world.” (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 36)

The framework of emerging Indian nationalist consciousness, thus, becomes a significant historical and cultural paradigm to study women's writing in India during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Chatterjee describes the modern-liberal context of freedom struggle in terms of "certain global standards set by the advanced nations of Western Europe, accompanied by the awareness that those standards have come from an alien culture and that the inherited culture of the nation did not provide the necessary adaptive leverage to enable it to read those standards of progress" (2). Therefore, Eastern type of nationalism was a response to this deficiency; it was "an attempt to equip the nation culturally and also to change it, followed by a regeneration of ancestral culture and a deliberate rejection of the alien culture to which the people have been drawn" (Sathe 240). The realization that the West could no longer be the referent for Indian ethos thus led to the rejection of the former.

This raises another pertinent issue, that of the aggrandizement and foregrounding of ancient Indian cultural lineage, literature and mythology, as an integral part of the national paradigm. Indian national identity highlighted, as Uberoi says, "the centrality of the feminine" in its symbolic representation, thereby suggesting that "the colonial encounter shaped the construction of Indian femininity" (42). Uberoi refers to "a common universe of discourse" in which both the colonisers and the colonised participated, with three main characteristics marking this discourse: the "privileging" of the woman as an object of discourse, convergences of multiplicities to understand femininity and, very importantly, the chalking out of the specific canon of textual and ritual practice that would define, authoritatively and authentically, an emerging Indian cultural tradition (42). As Uberoi states, the "recasting" (42) of women posited a set of identities on the one hand and a set of exclusions and negations on the other. The status of women thus became the defining signifier of the nature and condition of Indian society and "the essence of Indian culture and society was to be located in the past and present and future of Indian women" (Uberoi 42). Referring to Uma Chakravarti's 'Altekarian paradigm' which consists of the construction of a classical age of Indian civilisation and a narrative of its decline under the twin forces of Brahmanism and Islam, Uberoi foregrounds a basic question: How was the classical canon constituted? Uberoi herself gives the answer when she points out that the cultural tradition has been identified with the sacred tradition of religion. Collaborating this statement, Kapur—an art historian—says, "The touchstone for nineteenth century Indian renaissance is thus Hindu civilization" (68). Uberoi clearly states:

Thus a national identity was constituted through the construction of the ideal Hindu woman, and her characteristics derived from a hierarchy of textual authorities: the Vedas, Shastras, epics, puranas and so on. (43)

'Cultural' nationalism thus identified tradition with religion and with a Hinduism newly constituted through the identification of significant events and narratives from the massive corpus of Indian myths, history and legend. The 'recasting' of Indian women was henceforth a rescripting of the past through a carefully planned, strategic propagation of feminine ideal types, representing India not only to outsiders but also to itself. There was a "deification" of woman in certain social roles: "the pure virgin, the loyal and obedient wife, and most importantly of all, the 'mother'", all of which have their archetypes in the Hindu pantheon of Goddesses (Uberoi 42). Thus, in the definition of the canon, the 'Aryan' element was highlighted, with Ramayana and Mahabharata being the regenerated referents with pan-Indian relevance. Also, certain themes were identified which were consistent with the newly constituted notion of a 'perfect' Hindu woman, such as the self-sacrificing wifely devotion of Sita and the celebration of conjugal love in the legends of Nala and Damayanti, Shakuntala and Dushyanta etc.

In fact, there is a juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern in the projection of woman's question in the dominant Indian discourse. Indian woman is thought to be 'naturally' and essentially virtuous and in the development of the nationalist paradigm, both India and Indian womanhood are perceived as homogeneous entities. The terms 'nationalism', 'culture' and 'womanhood' share a dynamic, co-relational meaning and all three have been 'recast' with a different set of connotations in a span of the last two centuries. Though the original Latin sense of 'nasci' refers to an ethno-linguistic collectivity, a tribe inhabiting a specific territory, yet it is the political dimension that is now most highlighted in the term 'nationalism' (Choudhuri 83). "Culture", in the sense of national culture, constitutes a process that is "both hegemonic and homogenising", thereby rendering powerful the language, culture and religion of the dominant section (Choudhuri 83) and relegating others to the margins, as already noted in the discussion of Uberoi's ideas on the set of excluded identities.

The idea of an ideal national/Indian womanhood, like 'nation' and 'culture' carries with it "the sense of social transcendence" and women are regarded as the essence of Indian culture (Choudhuri 83-84). The reformer in the colonial India, thus looked towards the sanctified past in order to obtain validation of the proposed liberation of women. Specifically, this validation was based on two dimensions of Indian history—the Vedic Ages (Uberoi 43) or Shastric injunctions (Choudhuri 89). Interestingly, the emergent model of a reformed woman was greatly influenced by the culture of Victorianism and a parallel of the Indian pre-occupation with female chastity and purity, in the context of the celebration of a monogamous marriage, is to be found in Victorian England which also laid great

emphasis on sexual restraint and moral uprightness in women (Choudhuri 90-91; Tharu 260). Thus it was that “India was part of the modernisation process that conjoined the fates of England and India together, one as the coloniser and the other as the colonised” (Choudhuri 93). The specificity of the Indian middle class in colonial India consisted of the intelligentsia, including the public servants and members of the recognised independent professions and it was this class that was instrumental in the redefinition of tradition and culture. Sathe deconstructs the image of ‘the bhadramahila’ or ‘the respectable middle-class housewife’ as a product of urbanisation and modern liberal ideology, on the Brahminical-Victorian lines :

This new figure of woman was nothing more than a weak and discarded caricature of a rising modern bourgeois. This stratification of bhadramahila gives an indication of how women became a part of the cultural homogenisation. (Sathe 241)

This image finds a parallel in the much critiqued stereotype of ‘the happy housewife’ in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and though there is a sameness in the enforced perfection of womanhood to which the women were expected to conform, yet the cultural and historic specification cannot be sidelined. In India, the deification of women in the role of the mother was a unique feature of the nationalist paradigm of the first half of the twentieth century. There was “a symbolic use of the mother ranging from feminist assertion of women's power to be mother of the nation, to terrorist invocations of the protective and ravaging motion goddess, to the Gandhian lauding of the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother against the brutality of British power” (Sathe 242). Aurobindo's Savitri, projecting the image of the selfless Savitri's purity, her selfless wifely devotion, her powerlessness that contains the power to save Satyavan (in this case not only the nation but the human condition) is a representation of the deification of the mother role in the nationalist psyche. Ironically, though Gandhi did provide the moral legitimacy for women's cause, with the spinning wheel symbolically representing women's participation in the nation's regeneration, yet women's sphere was equally clearly defined by the wheel. Women would participate, yes, but without having to leave their home. The woman thus was not just victimized but rather chose for herself the path of suffering in order to regenerate the world around her (Tharu 262).

Along with the glorification of certain stereotypes from the classical canon, there were a parallel set of identities that were ignored or marginalised, namely, other religions and cultural traditions that were not encompassed in Hinduism, such as lower caste practices by Brahminical and Kshatriya models, folk genres and aesthetic values that were specifically indigenous in nature (Uberoi 43). Therefore, it can be safely said that the nationalist paradigm, at some level, pretended an authenticity that it did not carry in reality and consequently, set a hierarchy of hegemony of a culture, constituted of images and stereotypes that remained silent on the marginalised sections of society.

At this point of discussion, it becomes imperative to elaborate upon the feminist implications of the difference between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’. As already pointed out in this paper, it was Millett who foregrounded the notion of ‘sex’ as a biological construct and ‘gender’ as a socially constructed identity. One of the most powerful works to show that anatomy is not destiny and that sex-role stereotypes are merely arbitrary, is Mead's research on culture and personality. Her anthropological observations illumine the infinite variety of sexual patterns and the enormous plasticity of human nature, a vision based on the differences of sex and temperament she found in three primitive societies: the Arapesh, where both men and women were ‘feminine’ and ‘maternal’ in personality and passively sexual; the Mundugomor, where both husband and wife were violent, aggressive, positively sexed, ‘masculine’, and the Tchambuli, where woman was the dominant, impersonal managing partner and man the less responsible and emotionally dependent person. These observations, contained in her book *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) suggested that no aspects of behaviour are sex-linked. Anatomy is not destiny and women can realize their full capabilities in a society which replaces arbitrary sexual definitions with a recognition of genuine individual gifts (discussed in Friedan 68). Male images of women however only serve to embolden the view that it is better to preserve the sexual biological limitations imposed and established by a culture. That these limitations are different in different cultures, is a point that has already been delineated at length and so need not be repeated. Gender studies thus give us the interrelations between women and men, and the role of gender in structuring human societies, their histories, ideologies, economic and political systems. Gender can no more be marginalized in the study of human societies than the concept of ‘human action’ or the concept of ‘society’. It would not be possible to pursue any sort of social science without a concept of gender (Moore 6). Therefore, gender is one of the specificities of a culture that define its meaning and nature.

The most important element in patriarchal male-female relationships or gender relations, so to speak, is power—contained in the male and denied in the female. Gender roles thus expose the patterns of male power and female powerlessness that exist as a social norm in a culture. This ‘power’ ideology is particularly powerful because through conditioning, women themselves become perpetrators of male values, which ironically serve only to devalue them. Hence, feminist studies explicate the subtext of gender as the structuring principle of society. The binaries of the male-female relationship, encoded in the social, historical, cultural and political paradigm, are

signified in the 'powerful' male domination and the 'powerless' female subjugation. What happens when the female 'object' returns the masculine gaze, refusing to remain in the passive position, and questions/contests/debates the authority/dominance of the masculine position, is the crux of the gendered reading / interpretation in the context of feminist studies.. "The repressions of a patriarchal society create stances, things that cannot be said" (Madsen 19) and it is precisely these unsaid things that form the core of the feminist perspective.

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