



A NOTE ON FEMINISM AND POST MODERNISM

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ABSTRACT:

The Western hemisphere's physical and cultural ambience of the past four decades was the stage for the emergence of feminism and postmodernism. A study of the contrasts, similarities and interrelations, various artistic forms and media of expression render a vivid diversity and widespread popularity to these two isms- hence the apt title to this article should be –“A NOTE FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM”.

Recognizing and rejecting the flourishing undercurrent of unitary and biased, fictitious notions and extracting the different lifestyles, values, thoughts and history of another kind that are overshadowed by the rational logic, tradition, culture and history of age old male chauvinistic perspectives; and accepting and encouraging the natural plurality in the existence and expression of human beings- if these are considered to be the general characteristics of feminisms, then postmodernism and feminism ought to be allies. But we find this connection very complex when we observe the changes in feminisms caused by the influence of postmodernism.

Key Words: Feminism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Chauvinism, Plight of women, Psychological and Social Revolution, Political and Social Strife, Ethnic Studies, Post-Structuralism.

INTRODUCTION:

The Western hemisphere's physical and cultural ambience of the past four decades was the stage for the emergence of feminism and postmodernism. A study of the contrasts, similarities and interrelations, various artistic forms and media of expression render a vivid diversity and widespread popularity to these two isms- hence the apt title to this article should be –A NOTE ON FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM. Recognizing and rejecting the flourishing undercurrent of unitary and biased, fictitious notions and extracting the different lifestyles, values, thoughts and history of another kind that are overshadowed by the rational logic, tradition, culture and history of age old male chauvinistic perspectives and accepting and encouraging the natural plurality in the existence and expression of human beings- if these are considered to be the general characteristics of feminisms, then postmodernism and feminism ought to be allies. But we find this connection very complex when we observe the changes in feminisms caused by the influence of postmodernism. Postmodern and Post-Structural concern with discourse and language has spawned an interest in the construction of identity and the concept of difference.

The history of feminism can be classified into three stages. The first stage or "**THE FIRST WAVE**" corresponds to the sequence of movements in the first two decades of the 19th century aimed at attaining equal rights for women through adult franchise. These rights won with difficulty in the political and judicial spheres, paved the way for the women to demand equal status in all walks of life.

In fact, after attaining adult suffrage for women we came to understand the grave indifference meted out to women in the prevalent social structure. That-"the mechanism responsible for providing equal rights always sides with the dominant group of society as a result of which the complete justice to the oppressed class is a mirage" - is clear. Feminists have responded to postmodern ideas in a number of ways. Some feminists argue that feminist theory has always dealt with postmodern issues and indeed, has more to offer than male-centric postmodern writers.

Though we can't ascribe a definite period to the "**Second Wave**" in feminism we can say that it started in the late 60s'. The outstanding feature of the second wave in feminism is the realization in feminists that until and unless there is a complete psychological and social revolution, the

plight of women can't be alleviated. Consequently, they set out an in depth study coupled with political and social strife in order to confront the issue from various angles.

The feminist-theory evolved out of the influential movements of the 60's and 70's. But the earlier inspiration and boosting given by the writers like Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own* 1928) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) is undeniable. The widespread of criticism on feminism during the last five or six decades is the outcome of self introspection and discussion among the feminists on one hand and criticisms from the quarters of psychology, socialism, post modernism, ethnic studies, post-colonialism, theories of lesbian studies- on the other.

Simone de Beauvoir has challenged the male definitions of woman and called on women to define themselves outside the male/female dyad. Women, she urged, must be the subject rather than the object (other) of analysis. This concern was echoed and expanded by other feminists, particularly those calling for the recovery of women's voices and the development of knowledge from the standpoint of women.

As a result, feminism gave way to cultural feminism, poststructuralist feminism, social constructionism, equality-difference, feminism-gender theory etc. Some people welcome this plurality as postmodernism favors plurality whereas some supporters of feminism regret plurality as they fear that it will affect the objectives of feminist movement. There is no awareness in the feminist theories of the 60's and 80's that the entire concept was being carried out in a specific historical background / backdrop.

For instance, if we look at the efforts to pinpoint the root cause of the exploitation of women- they range from the basic physical differences between men and women to the concept of private and public with regard to home and society, women's labour, sexuality of women, domestic responsibility of procreation etc. In this context, some of the features of modern Western culture were wrongly felt to be universal. The seeds of this folly applicable to the contemporary scholastic world were sown in the era of Enlightenment of the 18th century. It has been the tradition of modern Western culture to carry out scholarly studies to invent universal and integrated principles for social and natural truths. However, the objective of explaining the true nature of God's creation had already been with the Western intellectual tradition. By the 20th century, the search for the ultimate truth and its basic principles was abandoned in scientific investigation but the zeal continued in the fields of philosophy and humanities.

The studies on feminism of the 60's and 70's concentrated on the experiences of women under patriarchy. Owing to the long standing menacing male chauvinism, the voices of women were suppressed and their lives were distorted and the needs, opinions and feelings of women were considered to be of little importance. In such oppressive times there was no

existence for women. To study this oppressive history and to bring out the voice of women, there was a two-phase effort in literary criticism in Britain and America. Critics like Kate Millet proved that most of the so-called Canonical literature spewed venom on women and misogynistic political and mental oppression occupied most of literature. Annet Colodney, Judith Fetterly another found fault with the literary historians for their ulterior motives in demeaning and projecting insufficient light on the literary genres taken up by women. To cite an example, in the 19th century, which was the golden age for the genre of novel, the literary historians often felt ill at ease with the domination and importance of women novelists.

There were strong attempts to make berths for women writers in the literary history of mid 70's. While writers like Ellen Mores suggested that there should be special tradition for women writers, Eliane Showalter contended that the women writers' culture was only a subculture but not a flow of mainstream culture. Substantiating her contention she strongly pleads that women are drawn away from the concept of collectivity due to their self-denial/frustrated attitude, their fame being temporary and the literary history of women is strewn with obstacles.

Sandra Gilbert, Susan Guber analysed the reaction of women writers against the severe cultural restrictions imposed on women and especially against bourgeois culture, and literature oriented sexual creed of women, that barred the initiative and creativity of women. This duo succeeded in throwing light on the fact that the literary works of women writers contain similarities in the plot, images, figures of speech, symbols, structure, narrative techniques etc., with their cultural estrangement, the violence they were subjected to in patriarchy and ghastly incidents they experienced - the more the banal realities were suppressed the stronger they surfaced through the works of women writers.

Another women writer Adrienne Rich, Appreciated the distinctive creativity of women despite their markedly different life styles from that of their counterparts I.e. men with regard to motherhood etc., (The Mad Woman in the Attic, 1979). But these writings lack the awareness that the generalizations made in them are restricted to a specific time, period and culture. On the other hand, based on Freudian psychology, Nancy Chodorow theorized that the sexual existence of women is built differently from that of men. Chodorow propounded that in the growth of women the stages of motherhood and pre-oedipal are a deciding factor and as a result of which the "self" of women unlike that of men, is not defensive by drawing boundaries around it but has friendly traits of accepting the relationship, diversity and contention. Around the end of 70's there was a cleavage between the supporters of a strong theoretical base for feminism and those who felt that theorization was nothing but the reflection of the male chauvinistic tendency. The latter group feared that the attitude of theorization of feminism would estrange it from its targeted political objectives. Here lies the key point between feminisms and post-modernisms.

The former groups were deeply influenced by the French theoreticians Julia Christera, Ellen Suisse, Louis Eragueri. This trio introduced the idealist tradition in opposition to the empirical philosophy prevalent in America /and Britain, and tried to achieve a universal outlook that had nothing to do with history. They made use of the analytical methods put forward by Derrida that "an incident is always temporary and relative and the incident lies in the differential relationship of the other linguistic contexts" and the theories of Yak Lacan deftly applying the Freudian Principles to linguistic philosophy. According to Jacques Derrida Western philosophy rests on binary opposites, such as truth/falsity, unity/diversity or man/woman, whereby the nature and primacy of the first term depends on the definition of its opposite(other). These definitions are as embedded in their opposites as they are in the nature of the object being defined. Derrida and Lacan also resolved that there was "no presence but void" in the center of the linguistic system.

However, Lacan attributed the unconscious desire rather than linguistic difference, as the reason for this. The child is under the delusion that since language is in the existence of a symbolic order made of general order of things, penis, father etc., it fulfills his desire. The self-consciousness of a girl growing up in such a linguistic world is possible only by yielding to the influence of phallo-centric symbolic order. Extending this theory, the French feminist women writers propounded that due to the non-availability of linguistic and social symbolic order to the women, basically they tend to tilt towards non-symbolic discourse thus evading the tyranny of Logic and Reason. Eragueri and Sis opined that the women's writings emerge from their physical consciousness, which is prior to the stage of language and symbolic order. These writings forego the women's sexual organs, bodily oozings and their periods; phallo-centric symbolic order and its delusive contentment of desire. Julia Christeva's duality of semiotic and symbolic concept explains that the writings of women are personal and destructive with irony and pun as its natural features.

The feud between feminism and post - modernism reached its climax with the advent of new historicism, theories of Michael Fucho, John Badhrilhart, and John Fransiwca Leotard. There is much similarity between the contentions of the feminists and the flaying of the trends about the 'self, wisdom and truth' since the era of enlightenment by postmodernism. Feminism successfully questioned the neutrality and the clarity of the ruling and the academic systems in introducing wisely universalizing the male chauvinistic perspective of a particular culture and race. However, it is noteworthy that the feminist theories of the 60's and 80's reflected the perspective of middle class white women of Eastern Europe and North America. Post-modernism exhorts us to be alert with the generalizations brought about by forfeiting the historical, regional, social and cultural limitations. All the contexts of feminisms in fixing the reason for the exploitation and suppression of women are related to modern western culture. To attribute universality to these contexts is remaking the follies of essentialist and epistemological theories of the Enlightenment.

However, a number of feminists have sought a middle ground in relation to postmodern thought. While agreeing that postmodernism, taken to its logical extreme and as practiced by its mostly white middle-class male proponents, appears to undermine feminists' search for a better, more egalitarian world. As a result of this the nature of the problems of the women of other regions and sect is neglected. Meanwhile, the plurality and the flexible, the equal inclination towards various perspectives of postmodernism pours cold water on the fire of the movements towards the capture of power. This is the problem with total relativism.

As Sabine Lovibond said, How can anyone ask me to say goodbye to emancipatory 'metanarratives' when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?" It is apt to cite the argument of Seyla Benhabib questioning the conclusion of Leo Tardant that language has no capacity for real proposition and the parameters to prove a thing always depend on place and context. Tardant weds the rejection of modern epistemology with proofs. And it is the contention of Ben Habib that this unscrupulous combination results in two types of dangers.

--Plurality of values: which makes it impossible to criticize the efforts of execution and liberation.

--This theory importance to a discourse over the rest inwardly gives thus making plurality meaningless.

Another problem posed to feminism by post-modernism is 'gender definition' the 'theory that portrays the physical differences of sex and gender i.e., natures of men and women are mutually contradictory' faced severe criticism. There is no relationship between gender and sex. No feature ascribed to masculinity is found in women. And at the same time many features of masculinity can be found in women also. We come across the natural phenomenon of women in men as well. In fact, the divisions of manhood and womanhood are mere compulsive classification. This dual frame shrinks the pluralities and possible diversity of personality of individuals. On the other hand, the cultural mechanisms prescribe the heterosexual theory of Foucault as natural. Any sexual relations other than heterosexual are not acceptable. In this view gender and sexuality are interdependent. It is not possible to define gender completely until the primacy given to heterosexuality is removed.

Suzanne Lorde criticized the complexity of postmodernists while praising the continuous change, mobility and performance; the postmodernists described the body as a perfect lively thing permitting the trespassing of the limitations. Suzanne Lorde found fault with such descriptions. She opines that our bodies have got their own limitations with regard to shape, size, movement and change and viewing it the other way is nothing but denying our physical being. We can take the body as a symbol for principle. Maybe that the reality of the world is incessantly plural and heterogeneous but there are limitations and pros and cons to the

comprehension and sense of human beings. Postmodernism, nourishing plurality to a much extent, hints at renouncing theorization either complete relativity or renouncing theory.

In the words of Jane Flux We can't claim simultaneously:

(1) Sense, self, wisdom are built socially. Hence, our learning to the possible extent depends on the social contexts and practices and

(2) the feminist theory unfolds the truth eternally?

To counter this uncertainty, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson.h " attempted to define a feminist oriented postmodernism. They advocated the repeal of totalization and essentialism. Diversity shouldn't be appreciated for the sake of diversity but anything should be viewed as a tool that curbs the faulty generalizations in a given historical and regional situation. It should be noted that postmodernism/ s is (are) also the rising ideology under a particular contextual background. Postmodernism failed to project an all time ideals to counter the blunders of modernism. This tendency should be a part of the understanding of postmodernism. Whether failure or success, the attempt for equality, after all, can't help itself becoming a pervasive ideal.

Though each wave of feminism had a different vigor and vibe, however both postmodernism and feminism strived to destabilize patriarchy and the societal implications of such norms. Feminism and Post-Modern, both movements have made a mark for themselves in the canon of literature, art and politics, however, its influence and impact is more to be seen in the Western Hemisphere but the same intensity has not been made across. The ideas of feminism and postmodernism cannot be easily encapsulated in one single phrase, but its ideologies keep resonating in all literary and non-literary works. With significant works that fall under the category of feminism and post-modernism, these two movements have become ever ending discussions and ideologies with constant evolution and developments. Despite three waves of feminism, the concept of feminism still remains waverly and each individual has a different hold on the subject. Unfortunately, Postmodernism and Feminism theories are being discussed far and wide, however there still remains a lack of lucidity and a lot of arguments are still under consideration. The concepts and theories are interpreted differently in the two hemispheres.

The first wave of feminism which began in 1848 was only pointing at women suffrage, thus giving them an equal voice in electing their leader, thus enabling them to choose a leader for equal benefit. The second of feminism began in the 1960s and 1970s to fight the unjust discrimination and issues of equality, perhaps the most significant thoughts have been brought up here and the real struggle for equality and the incongruities have been tried to be answered and looked into, however, all the ideals of the second wave have not been considered rightly and are often misinterpreted. The second wave started in the United States of America and

gradually it spread across the world. The object of domesticity has been discussed during this wave for the first time and de facto inequalities have also been brought to the point of revolution which have created a great stir in the society. The third wave of feminism aimed at redesigning the entire dynamics and structure of feminism and society in connection to gender-masculinity and femininity. This was also the period, when emphasis has been made upon the oppression and the plight of the society. Civil rights have been asked for women too.

Postmodernism, another significant ideology and literary theory, seems to complement the concept of Feminism. Postmodernism is a pragmatic approach, thus it rejected the principles of the past and people started to doubt objectivity and empiricism started to crop into their lives. For the first time, people started to doubt even practicality. The Literature produced too was not only a reaction to Modernism, but was fragmented. Postmodernism is a composite of various parts and ideas that have coexisted. It began in the 1970s and a contemporary of the second wave of feminism, thus both postmodernism and feminism began to question and challenge the already existing norms of the society and postmodernism has taken it a step forward by even doubting objectivity. Therefore, the postulates of both have always been under study, reconsideration and research. The principles of both have rendered different meaning to different cultures, however the crux of these remains the same, in its own way.

So, both postmodernism and feminism have been absorbed differently in the western hemisphere and this research article attempts to bring to the surface the various stages and waves of each and how each has been considered and reconsidered. How the ideas have underwent changes and developments until the recent past. As the ideologies and concepts are undergoing constant change, it is essential to know the emergence, various stages and developments and this paper analyzes each wave and ideology and presents a comprehensive picture of it. To have an understanding, feminism and postmodernism have been studied, but the focus of this article remains with the Western Hemisphere for a detailed study, understanding and analysis.

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