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Women's Journey amidst Feminist Voices

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Abstract:

That Feminism is not a homogeneous monolith, but a contentious terrain is apparent from the different perspectives of Feminists. This research paper presents the heterogeneity of female concerns. Literature as an art that vicariously reflects upon life is invariably implicated in and impacted by one's experiences of femininity and masculinity. The paper makes an attempt to trace the journey of Women from the 'cramped confines of patriarchal space' to becoming truly 'her own mistress' amidst Feminist voices.

Keywords: Feminism, Heterogeneity, Patriarchal Space, Feminist Voices.

Dealing with the experiences of femininity; which refers to possessing a set of culturally defined characteristics; being female, a biological position in terms of sex, which is natural and given and Feminist, a political position, which comes from the distinction between 'female' and 'feminine', Elaine Showalter presents her theory.

On the other hand, Toril Moi argues that Feminism cannot be equated with "femaleness" or "femininity" since it is a political project dedicated to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. Moi sees Feminism as unfolding in three cumulative phases:

- The demand for equal access to the symbolic order.
- The rejection of the male symbolic order in the name of difference.
- The rejection of the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.ⁱ

Thus, Feminism can be posited as a contradictory intellectual, ideological and activist baggage, but despite this seemingly cacophony of voices, it is held together by a commonality of some basic premises which are as follows:

- An overtly self-conscious Feminist perspective as a prism to analyze society from a socio-cultural, economic, political, philosophical and epistemological point of view.

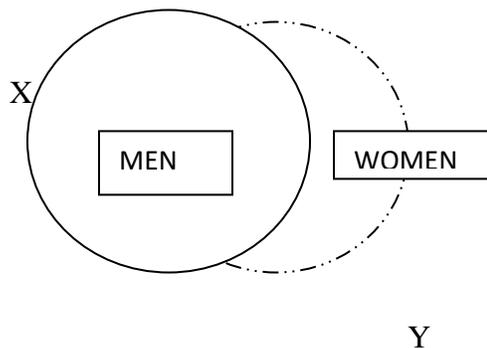
- Feminism, with a history of its own has evolved over time and space. What had originated as Feminism as a monolithic concept has been replaced by 'Feminism(s)', touching upon other conceptual frameworks like race, class and sexual orientation.
- At the level of praxis, Feminism has developed as a socio-cultural and political movement for mending the condition of women.
- At the level of theory, Feminism aims at empowering, emancipating women and creating women-centric episteme.

Authors have always been conscious of the subordinate roles women are made to play in any culture, so there has been a voice for her sentiments in the literary world; though this female voice undergoes different experiences of suppression as well as acceptance. For example, there may be shrewd and nagging women in Shakespeare's plays, but on the whole women in Shakespeare outdo men with their intellect and beauty. And poles apart is the scene of Henchard selling his wife in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Thus, in portrayal of women's context, "happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain." (Quoting from Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.)

The emphasis upon Feminism(s) falls differently with respect to time and spatiality: English Feminist Criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French Feminist Criticism, essentializing psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American Feminist Criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. However, there's a common strive to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority.

With reference to Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's monumental project, *Women Writing in India*, this paper presents Feminist's approach to establish a literary tradition, different from the mainstream that can account for feminine creativity with resurrection of female texts and genres. To achieve this end, the paper incorporates Elaine Showalter's theories on Feminist criticism, Gilbert and Gubar and Helen Cixous' idea of independence and fluidity respectively in Women's writings, Mary Wollstonecraft's idea of turning energies onto her 'self'; the female self. Furthermore, quotes and instances from the literary pieces of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Bronte and Emily Bronte, John Milton, Shashi Deshpande, Toni Morrison contribute to enrich the arguments put forward in this paper.

Under the rubric of American Feminist Criticism, Elaine Showalter uses locational taxonomy to understand Feminism(s) in her essay "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness". The model that holds maximum potential for Showalter's essay is the one postulated by Ardener brothers, Edwin and Shirley Ardener. Edwin argues that "women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group. Showalter finds this model "crucial to understanding both how they are perceived by the dominant group and how they perceive themselves and others".



This model plots the muted (female) and dominant (male) group as intersecting circles-X and Y- within the social totality. The crescent of women's circle that lies outside the dominant (Men) circle is termed as wild. The 'wild' zone of women's culture can be thought of spatially (no man's land/place forbidden for men), experientially (that is in terms of those female lifestyles which are outside of and unlike those of men), or metaphysically (or in terms of consciousness). The wild crescent, from men's point of view, is always imaginary, simply a projection of the unconsciousness.

Showalter also writes on how these theorizations are deficient. Here, the wild zone can serve as a theoretical base for women's difference. Through voluntary entry into the 'wild' zone, a woman can write her way out of the 'cramped confines of patriarchal space'. The image of this authenticating journey manifests in women's writings. For instance, the female protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" pulls off most of the wallpaper which is portrayed as a metaphor for patriarchal bondage, and says,

"I've got out at last... You can't put me back!"

S. Tharu and K. Lalitha's have deployed four ideas in order to explore women's literature, which is in Showalter's words- "a study of tradition of women's writings". So, here I will present the examples from various writings and philosophies that support their theories.ⁱⁱ

First is the notion of release/escape which serves as a trope in the women's writings. Like Gulliver in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a 'most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions'; women authors are wanderers in the male canonical region of authorship. The "release" here is principally from "male houses" and "male texts"; a constant struggle to get free from social, and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society. Like, the French Philosopher Rousseau in his *Philosophy of Enlightenment* stresses upon human's 'natural instinct to be free' favoring education, thinking for oneself, knowledge and being optimistic about social change.

Second is the concept of experience; of how true and meaningful source is 'experience' in women's writings. Here, I would quote Emily Dickinson's poetry:

"I felt a FUNERAL in my brain/And mourners, to and fro/Kept treading, treading, till it seemed/ that sense was breaking through..."

Dickinson's poetry is full of death imagery, gore, grotesque, morbidity. The reason is her experience; she witnessed a lot of tragedies of death of her near ones, so her poetry is the reflection of the same. She accepted this in her letters to her friends and relatives.

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of their own* that was published in 1977, refers to "female subculture" which in Victorian England especially, ensures that women's experience of living and of writing would be pointedly distinct from each other. Though a "delicate network of influences operating in time" is evident in the women's tradition she charts.

Another example is Emily Bronte's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* which is so full of raw passion and magnificent in terms of emotions, Bronte delves deeper into the psyche of its characters, though in real life Bronte never interacted with people outside her family. She was her sole world. In the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, in 1850, Charlotte Bronte wrote:

"...except to go to church or take a walk on the hills, she rarely crossed the threshold of home."



Then is the idea of consciousness which made women attain self-confidence and a kind of "recovery" in the literary canon. For instance, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte attempts to depict a complete female identity, and she expresses her heroine's consciousness through an extraordinary range of narrative devices, ways to bring about these are dreams, hallucinations, visions, surrealistic paintings and masquerades, and the sexual experiences of the female body are expressed spatially or through a pattern of literary, biblical, and mythological allusions.

Women authors make way for the full strength and development of the central consciousness, for the integration of the body and the spirit which is evident in the works of Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark; going down the line till other twentieth-century British women novelists.

Furthermore, the essayists'(S. Tharu and K. Lalitha) contest upon what constitutes the idea of the real. Women are either portrayed as 'Angels of the house' or 'Devils in the flesh'; this "untrue", "unreal" portrayal of women in male writings account to the "wilderness" suggested by Ardener's model. Subhuman description of female nature is evident through the deployment of corpulent, florid, violent imageries such as "the foul spectre", "the vampyre", "a hag", " a witch “,” an Indian Messaline".

With Mary Wollstonecraft's essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792), there was growing need for an equal status for both men and women all around the world. If it is assumed that there's a single and only one set of human rights, then it is unreasonable and irrational to treat women differently. And to do so is not morally wrong but also imprudent. Wollstonecraft notes the derogatory view of women, in texts like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, saw a conflict within Milton between an overt belief in male superiority and a latent desire for equality between the two sexes; for instance, Eve says to Adam:

“God is thy law, thou mine”

And, on the other hand is Adam requesting to God to create for him a mate who will be his equal:

“Among unequals what society/ Can sort, what harmony or true delight?”

A Feminist critiques the ways in which representations of gender (gender per se or in

conjunction with other categories such as caste, race or class) produce, transform, and transcend social stereotypes about men and women. Showalter finds an analogy of pen as penis as an instrument of regenerative power which is explicit in Gilbert and Gubar's theorizations of women's literature and its positing of the difference of women writing oppressive. Quoting Miller, she postulates, "The difference of woman's literary practice must be sought in the 'body of her writing and not the writing of her body'".

While Elaine Showalter and S. Gilbert and S. Gubar revise literary history to better account for the place of canonized women writers in it, other authors have sketched out alternate traditions parallel to but not dependent upon the development of writings by white, heterosexual, middle class women authors. These include lesbian novels and African-American women's novels. These histories are trying to make place by writing literary histories of tradition that have been excluded from the conventional studies of great literature and that hold only peripheral space in traditions based on 'great women writers'. Each conceives of a tradition sketched out as independent and free-standing. Another framework in this direction is Black Feminism, by and large, an awareness among black women that they have been exploited in life, that this exploitation of them is rooted in patriarchal hegemony and racial discrimination, that they have been misrepresented in literature simply because they are black, female and poor. As a consequence of this "double jeopardy" of Racism and Sexism, "a black woman has nothing to fall on, not femaleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything" (as put by Toni Morrison very succinctly). This experience of jeopardy represented the rise of the voice of the black women in literature by Black women writers. Weaving and telling stories around and of their struggle, they brought to the front the black woman's oppression and rape by both white and black men. The novels of Toni Morrison confirm her feminist consciousness. As a black woman writer, she brings the black women out of their 'invisibility', creates a world dominated by black women, shows the women's especially black women's double oppression and gives voice to the black women. Morrison's feminist consciousness enables her to see beyond the racial boundaries and develop the theme of female bonding in her novels. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* tells the tragic tale of the rape of a twelve year old black girl by her racially emasculated father supporting what the critic Barbara Omolade said,

"There can be no analysis of race without an analysis of gender and there's no understanding of



gender without an understanding of race”.

Alice Walker (in her masterpiece *The Color Purple*) and Toni Morrison’s deployment of the theme of female bonding resonates with French Feminist Luce Irigaray’s analysis of the oppression of women in terms of Marx: ‘Women are turned into property, into objects of exchange between men, a transaction which denies their subjectivity and turns them into objects. She urges women to use their nearness to develop closeness to each other; to work together to resist the oppression that denies them their pleasure and their language’. On the other hand, Helen Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa"(1975/76) both discusses and illustrates her theories of women's writings. It is not linear, logical, or progressive which means that it is not constrained by traditional (masculine/patriarchal) notions of argumentation and development. The movement of feminine writing is more fluid than direct, more experimental than argumentative. Thus, the debate goes on. As Emily Dickinson puts it:

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant”, that is, to tell the truth deviously- not straight, but crookedly, indirectly, with irony. Hence, Women’s creativity turns out to be palimpsest works whose decisions conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning, as Gilbert and Gubar say. Indeed, to be a woman writer was a difficult task, simultaneously conforming and subverting patriarchal literary standards.

Taking into account the eternal, innate, distinct and immutable facts of life, Shashi Deshpande in the Indian context highlights the fact that a woman is not merely a conglomerate of Feminine functions.ⁱⁱⁱ She must be judged at par with her male counterpart on the basis of her potential. Deshpande has portrayed the new Indian Woman and her dilemmas, her efforts to understand herself and to preserve her identity as a wife, mother and above all as a human being in the traditional bound, male dominated Indian society.

Deshpande is against categorizations, “When you deal with just my work, then take me as an individual writer and deal accordingly. Don’t call it a woman’s writing about women, read by women, for women and studied in the women’s studies departments and so on.” I hate this “women’s lib” separating women’s writing. It is just self defeating.”

Amidst all these voices, is the women authors' attempt to destroy the darkness accentuated in their psyche by the dominant male authorship, in order to become truly her “own Mistress”.

Notes:

- i. From Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
- ii. The essayists write of the above mentioned four ideas under the section which incorporates Anglo Feminist Criticism.
- iii. With relation to Shashi Deshpande's novels *That Long Silence* (1988).

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