“Gender attributes are performative rather than expressive”: An understanding of Feminism

Suparna Roy

1Affiliation not available

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Abstract

Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within western society, ranging from culture to law. Patriarchy, if considered a mutating drug resisting virus the Feminism is an ‘antidote’ to it. Literature as De Bonald considers “is an expression of society”. Feminism, if considered a hermeneutical device which is a methodology for interpreting texts, it has always focused on the vast spectrum of marginalization in India, which is perhaps so intricately designed, that when it gets unfold; its spectrum reflects all those wailing lives which gets veiled by this intricate design of culture, power and aesthetics. Literary depiction of the marginalized lives has gain immense significance at present. Feminism assisted in diagnosing the pathologies of culture which if described as a complex social apparatus dices the norms and regulations and is a stratified concept with hues that light up the disillusionment and dissent. Hence my paper would trace how from the history Feminism gradually became a ‘play’!

Introduction

Simone De Beauvoir wrote that “the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex” was Christine de Pizan who wrote Epitre au Dieu d’Amour (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century. Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within western society, ranging from culture to law. According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of Feminism can be divided into three waves- the first wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century which can be referred to as an extended period of feminist activities in United Kingdom and United State involving the Suffragettes and focusing on equal contract and property rights for women. The second wave refers to the period of activity from early 1960s to late 1980s which was as Estelle Freedman said focused on other aspects of equality like ending discrimination. The slogan “Personal is Political” was coined by Carol Hanisch and became synonymous to the second wave. Then chronologically moving from The Second Sex of Simone De Beauvoir, the Feminist Mystique and finally Women’s Liberation in USA gradually marked the beginning of Third wave Feminism during the early 1990s which seeks to challenge second wave’s essentialist definitions of femininity. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to third wave’s ideology. The third wave focused on “micro-politics”. Other spectrum of Feminism included Socialist and Marxist, Radical, Liberal, Black and Post-colonial and third world Feminisms.

Theoretical Interpretations

Patriarchy, if considered a mutating drug resisting virus the Feminism is an ‘antidote’ to it. Literature as De Bonald considers “is an expression of society”. Feminism, if considered a hermeneutical device which is a methodology for interpreting texts, it has always focused on the vast spectrum of marginalization in India, which is perhaps so intricately designed, that when it gets unfold; its spectrum reflects all those wailing lives which gets veiled by this intricate design of culture, power and aesthetics. Literary depiction of the marginalized lives has gain immense significance at present. Patriarchy, if considered as the source of all
inequalities, constructed identities, restrictions and markers for all bodies in a society (under the pretext of all being “natural”), then ‘marginalization’, a product of power regimes, is used to operate, control and construct bodies and deprive them of their basic rights. Marginalization is a broader operation to segregate and mark bodies on the basis of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, social, cultural, economic, creed and other factors. Focusing on three most important categories of marginalization—caste, class and gender we can analyze how numerous lives are forced to move to the periphery or edge of the society to struggle and continue living, how their identities are stigmatized, their desires, dreams, voices are crumbled into invisibility and silences! Marginalization is a chain of events taking place in a society to create certain restrictions for few and power for the rest. Gender, class and caste are further divided into layers, creating a stratified structure where power dynamics moulds and produces identities, not for recognition but for marginalization, oppression.

Feminism assisted in diagnosing the pathologies of culture which if described as a complex social apparatus dices the norms and regulations and is a stratified concept with hues that light up the disillusionment and dissent. Multiculturalism indeed has appreciated the difference in cultures but has also made avenues accessible to analyze it from queer perspectives. Culture and presentation of women dices each other into a complex fabricated network of tension that portrays incomplete and inaccurate female characters. “Women”, as patriarchy defines them are only those with ‘vaginas” and the ‘intersectionality’ is completely essentialized for ‘identity’ is only defined in parameter to “body” and “sex” which over years of ‘cultural practice’ have resulted in being “natural” and this is important to understand the intersectionality of the term “woman” which has been essentialized by our “benevolent patriarchal” world! The identity of what a “woman” is gets trapped in the supposed links between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ to be inherently related and ‘culturally’ bound. The concept of “women” as Butler defines- “Women are the sex which is not “one”. Within...a phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable...women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity” (Butler, 13). Projecting the plight of “women” and restrictions imposed upon them is because they are ‘marked’. As Simone De Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*(1949) that men are considered universal so are left unmarked while women becomes “women” because they are marked, restricted and norms are imposed upon them.

Gender and Sexuality are two most complexly designed, culturally constructed and ambiguously inter-related terms used within the spectrum of Feminism that considers “sex” as an operative term to theorize its deconstructive cultural perspectives. As Stevie Jackson and Jackie Jones regarded in her article- *Contemporary Feminist Theory* that “The concepts of gender and sexuality as a highly ambiguous term, as a point of reference” (Jackson, 131, ch-10). Helene Cixous notes in *Laugh of Medusa* that men and women enter the symbolic order in a different way and the subject position open to either sex is different. Cixious’s understanding that the centre of the symbolic order is ‘phallus’ and every-body surrounding it stands in the periphery makes women (without intersectionality) as the victim of this phallocentric society. One needs to stop thinking Gender as inherently linked to one’s sex and that it is natural. To say, nothing is natural. Body is just a word (as Judith Butler said in her book Gender Trouble [1990]) that is strategically used under artificial rules for the convenience of ‘power’ to operate. It has been a “norm” to connect one’s sexuality with their Gender and establish that as “naturally built”. The dichotomy of ‘penis/vagina’ over years has linked itself to make/female understanding of bodies. Emphasizing this “inherent” link between one’s gender and sexuality, for which I would draw few instances of some literary works which over time reflected how the gender-female/women characters are made to couple up with a male/man presenting the inherent, coherent compulsory relation between one’s gender and sexuality obliterating any possibility of ‘queer’ relationships—Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), *Bombay Brides*(2018) by Esther David, Paulo Coelho’s *Winner Stands Alone* (2008) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall apart* (1958).

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of societies irrespective of anything. Equality can only function if society starts including all voices that demands equal rights as humans before getting tagged by rights based on their Genders, when society will move beyond identifying bodies with “natural” identities. Gender is just a word that is travelling without destination and until we try to fix its destination all humans can be treated equally irrespective of Gender. Therefore, for a world beyond Gender Difference, needs to stop marking and ‘demarking’ human identities based on ‘body’. Hence it is important to focus on deconstructing the stereotypical gendered methods of scrutinizing, which not only gives rise to issues and challenges but results in dehumanization of humans. It’s important would explore how the operation of the “inherent link” between Gender and Sexuality has made “women” a victimized character in many literary works.

Feminism stands for ‘inclusivity’ that can act as a core for equality. Now it has become a norm to establish a person’s identity based on only a single aspect of them, of which ‘sexual identity’ acts as a marker for all bodies( lesbians, gays, LGBTQ, man, woman, sex workers, dalits, etc). Sexuality has however remained as a medium of power and politics to control and produce resulting in creations of identities and maintaining an inherent link between Gender and Sexuality. But it is important to realize sexuality is not with whom we have sex rather it determines towards whom we are sexually attracted. It has been a “norm” to connect one’s sexuality with their Gender and establish that as “naturally built”. The dichotomy of ‘penis/vagina’ over years has linked itself to make/female understanding of bodies. However sexuality becomes more complex because it draws the ‘desire’ of a human body into consideration and when it does so it establishes an inherent link between sex and gender and desire. But as Judith Butler said in Gender Trouble (1990), “sex” is not “natural”; sex (male/female) is seen to cause gender (masculine- men/ feminine- woman) which then is seen as a kind of continuum. Butler emphasizes the fact that identity is free floating and not connected to one’s ‘essence rather performance’. As Mary McIntosh in her article- Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity said, “the way forward, instead, involves recognizing that gender attributes are performative rather than expressive” (McIntosh, 114). Desire or sexuality then becomes ‘free-floating’ and not connected to one’s Gender/Sex. The problem arises when the society determines the connectivity and tries to establish the coherence between sex/gender/desire by presenting a human body with ‘vagina’ is bound to become a ‘woman’ and ‘desire’ a man confirming the heterosexuality and following it as the “ideal norm”. Perhaps this “ideal norm” makes any “body” trying to deviate from the” legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality” (Foucault, 38) a victim of patriarchy and as what Michel Foucault said in The History of Sexuality (1976) that “The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality had more right to discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps but quieter” (Foucault, 38). Butler deconstructs this inherent connection and the ‘compulsory order’ of sex/gender/desire by stating that it is not sex that leads to gender and that leads to desire rather it is the ‘mis-pre-understanding’ which originates from one’s “normative” desire, meaning heterosexuality is “norm”, so a “man” has to have a “natural” phallus stating that it is desire that leads to gender that leads to sex- “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is a culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (Butler, 9-10).

Conclusion
Thus the term Feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement which at first aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women and then gradually included all ‘subaltern’, marginalized voices. The theory of feminism together with post-structuralism and deconstruction has allowed us to include and ‘play’ with gender roles and identities rather than excluding and fixing it. Post-structuralist feminist theory in the field of literature has allowed us to deconstruct many literary texts and bring out ‘what a literary text can mean’ rather than the inherent meaning assumed to be present already, thereby making literature intersectional, reflective, interpretative and hence a spectrum, a journey through which the reader is able to make the ‘illusory’ world associated with reality. Feminism involves political and sociological theories concerned with issues of suppressed voices and ‘marked bodies’ resulted in production of works Gender Trouble where Butler indeed presents the feminist revaluation of ‘drag’ and promotes unity between feminists and gay movements. We can refer to Adrienne Rich’s essay, Compulsory
Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, where she mentions how lesbians were obliterated from literature and even from the mainstream feminist movement. She argues that society has made Heterosexuality “natural” so that it can be used as a violent political device to render women in a subordinate situation. Women are psychologically conditioned to think that they need to get a man to be sexually satisfied. They are restricted from enjoying the comfort of their own body with the same sex body. Lesbian motherhood is presented as inappropriate which forces women to accept heterosexuality as “natural” and obligatory and thereby fails to understand female sexual bonding is the only way that women can experience women identification. Therefore Feminism has demonstrated a welcome political turn and a journey without destination.

Works Cited


Jackson, Stevi and Jackie Jones. “Contemporary Feminist Theories.”

Edinburgh University

