



# INTERROGATING THE LANGUAGE OF FEMINISTS IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA AND AFRICA

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## Abstract

*Feminism has come a long way. Gone are the days when women took out rallies to fight for their suffragist rights. Gone are the days when women demanded for the demonstration of equality in their pay slips. Gone are the days when women writers were bashful to reveal their gender identity and wrote in the guise of a male. Thanks to the surging waves of Feminists movements, the emergence of the "new woman" has turned the tables on the patriarchal world order. In an age of cyber punkism, when the proxemics of the 'private' and the 'public' has been problematised, the 'muscle power' has been contested and wrested by the 'lung power' and 'scribal power' of women's writing and has become a force to reckon with. The claims, however, of feminism in its fight for women's liberation are not without limitations. Black feminists Barbara Christian and Alice Walker and Third world feminists Gayatri Chakravathi Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have articulated their concerns of homogenizing the female subjectivity without*

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contextualizing its cultural constructions. This paper seeks to extend the argument further by looking into the representational politics within the Third World feminist discourses. Also, the lingo, 'women's liberation' has become the watchword of feminist's movements across worlds (First, Second, and the Third). Drawing on Jacques Lacan's theoretical insistence that there is no feminine outside language, the ambiguity that clouds the term/language of feminists is subjected to scrutiny all the while highlighting the need for a comprehensive sociological awareness in articulating women's concerns. Therefore this paper purports to interrogate the validation of certain claims of 'feminism' and its complicity with the Lichtung of academia which is increasingly becoming a fetish.

Women have always been the centre of attraction in the history of 'mankind'. Be it a rich resource in meeting the perennial sexual demands of lecherous men or having to satiate the aesthetic desires of male artists, women have been involuntarily drawn to the subjection of male gaze. The objectification of women has been responsible for the production of tropes and images. As a result, women, irrespective of race, class and caste, have been stereotyped which placed them on a pedestal to be revered and adored or condemned and subjugated, either way, downplaying the humanness of women. These discursive practices have had a double-edged impact on the males (to persist in their hegemonic domination of phallogocentric worldview) and on the females (internalisation of these typologies), which form the core of gender politics. It is against these (mis)representations that feminists have taken up the cudgels and work(ed) towards what has come to be known as 'Women's Liberation'.

Ever since the third wave of feminists entered the 'female phase', the issues of women have been articulated at various levels which saw the elision of the centre/periphery binary. The post-modern era witnesses the emergence of women power in almost all sectors, both public and private. The invasion of women writers, in the literary scene, has furthered the cause of marginalised women. Feminists/gynocritics and different forms of feminism have taken centre stage in the academia so much so that there is a proliferation of researches made on third world women, subaltern women, women in tribal societies, settler women, expatriate women, Diasporic women and so on. As part of women's literary discourse, books authored by male writers are rewritten from the female perspective, feminist reading strategies have been introduced, sacred texts have been deconstructed (Feminist's Re-writing of the Bible), efforts have been taken to invent new language forms for women, classical mythologies are de-mythified (Ramayana into Seethayana) to bring out the gender

politics that accede in the construction of feminine images and lit criticism has been renamed as clit criticism.

Taking these efforts toward women's Lib movement into consideration, this paper explores the dimension of gender in the literary and social canon as captured in the historical experiences of India and Africa. It also seeks to point out a few limitations and pitfalls, inclusive of the theoretical perspective and the practical point of view. Some of the issues like the politics of representation within the feminist framework and the *Lichtung* of feminist theories are critically evaluated. It also purports to raise questions on the validity of some feminist contentions all the while pointing to the need to go beyond the proposed feminist paradigm.

1. With the avalanche of feminist movements and their involvement with gender polity, the term 'feminist' has been clouded with ambiguous derivations. In the historical sense, the term stood as a metonym for anyone who would fight for the rights of women. But ever since those rights were recognised, at least on legal terms, the term has managed to garner the 'spillage of meanings'. The question 'who is a feminist', has a number of complications about it. So much so that even university educated women are confused as to whether they are feminists or not. For example, the following are the contrastive responses from the present generation women:
  1. "I'll cling to the word "feminist" until the day I die because I can't escape the fact that my life would be far more limited and constrained if it weren't for previous generations of feminists. Also, I would be terribly embarrassed to ever say I wasn't a feminist. A woman saying "I'm not a feminist," sounds to me like she is saying, "My rights aren't very important to me."
  2. Is it possible to be a male feminist and still refer to women as "chicks" and "broads"? If so, maybe I'll sign up.
  3. "Can one be a feminist and be against gay rights? Not likely. Can one be a feminist and be against the different sexual permutations? Not likely. Can one be a feminist and believe in the biblical model of male & female family dynamics? Not bloody likely". Then I'm sorry, I'm not one.

The situation gets muddled up, particularly, with the extreme stand taken by the radical feminists and the feminist ideological support for homosexuality and lesbian relationships, which have resulted in a woman refusing to be called 'feminist'. Also stereotypes regarding 'feminists' as 'arrogant and rebels' do not serve the cause of feminist movement that purpose to work towards the emancipation of women. The politics of construction of these tropes and images involves both, chauvinistic men and the so called 'conservative women' who are either too bashful or scared of

getting branded, and refuse to identify themselves with any feminist movement, though all the while negotiating spaces for their womanhood.

- 2 Another area of concern is the feminist claim for gender exclusivity. Because of the insider/outsider binary divide, feminism, almost, does not provide any scope for the involvement of men in furthering the cause of women liberation. Even as great a thinker like Derrida was denounced for undertaking 'gender tourism' when he tried addressing the cause of women. But it is only appropriate to consider the significant influences male thinkers like John Stuart Mill (*The Subjection of Women*), Karl Marx (*Social theories*), Michel Foucault (*Sexuality and Power*), to name only a few, had on the feminist thinkers/activists and movements at large.

In the African literary context, while there is so much of criticism on 'female circumcision' (FGC), as one of the hideous primitive cultural practices of Africa, there are male writers like Achebe and Ngugi who champion the cause of women in their novels, *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Devil on the Cross* respectively. It is also not surprising to find feminists divided in their opinions toward FGC, for the advocates of it consider the solidity and cultural significance these practices denote.

On the other hand, FGC has been issueized by the western feminist discourses which consider this as violence against female sexuality. According to the western narratives, these practices were intended to control the female sexual sensitivity and to deny the African woman of her sexual pleasures. In spite of the increasing reactions, it is practiced in twenty-eight out of fifty-three countries in Africa. But it should be noted that Female circumcision, like any other cultural practice, is an intrinsic part of a total cultural experience of a community for the African women. Its discussion can only be effectively undertaken as part of an entire cultural experience. Since Africa has a strong sense of community identity, the rights of individuals are not isolated questions which cannot be asserted against group interests, because traditionally, the group protects the individual. If it is considered as a violation of rights, it is essential not to perceive in relation to individual women or girls but should be considered as a violation within a group and society as a whole. But the whole debate gets a different picture when researches find that there are various kinds of FGC and most women, though bashfully, agree to be able to experience orgasm during sexual intercourse. Some feel that circumcision enhances their sexual pleasures. Taking these alternate discourses into consideration, questions should be raised as to, who is issueizing these issues? And for what ends? According to Adeline Apena:

The perspective that female circumcision necessarily robs women of sexual pleasure presupposes that only the clitoris ensures sexual urge and guarantees sexual pleasure for women. Therefore, all women who are not circumcised should experience sexual urge and sexual pleasure. If having the clitoris alone does guarantee sexual satisfaction and pleasure, it implies that all women with clitoris should always have sexual pleasure. But if that is not the case then there are other parts of a woman's body and dynamics yet to be made known and emphasized which affect female sexuality and responses.

Keeping the complexity of the cultural nuances of Africa, it would augur well for non-African feminists to contend with issues like 'frigidity', 'marriage as an organised rape', and leave these issues for African feminists to negotiate.

- 3 "And what is equality anyways? Since men don't get pregnant and almost never lactate, are rights pertaining to pregnancy and lactation a matter of equality?"

'Women's Liberation' has always been the watchword of Feminist movements irrespective of class, caste and nationality. Ever since women have taken to writing, males have been demonized, (rightly? or wrongly?) as women march to the glorious resonance of humanitarian ideals. But it is worthwhile to pause and reflect on the ramifications of the term 'women's liberation'.

- (i) When does a woman get liberated? Or, how does a woman/girl assert her liberation? Is mythification of virginity a culmination of liberation? Or is it when girls like Sania Mirza are free to don themselves in 'revealing tops with racy verses and undersized skirts' suggestive of India's poverty? Or as Germaine Greer would suggest women to taste their menstrual blood?
- (ii) From whom? Are men the only captors who stifle the individuality of a woman? What about the women who bicker about women? What about those mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law who are engaged in mortal combat? Who is to be blamed for the female infanticide and foeticide? Are not women incriminated in these heinous crimes? Is it not essential for a woman to get liberated from her own mental blocks? Or is 'women's liberation' just another blame-game?
- (iii) What are the means? Indian women did not have to fight for their rights (suffragist movement, literacy campaign) as their British sisters have done during the first wave of feminism. Because India was under the British rule,

most of the legal sanctions that were granted for the British women came to have effect for Indian women as well. While this has served well for the cause of Indian women, it also poses a threat when feminist theories are borrowed directly from the west without taking the Indian cultural context into consideration. For example: The matrilineal systems that existed in pre-colonial Kerala and other communities in North India do not have theoretical space in the western models to be explored. Can we boast of an Indian model of feminism or feminists? Are their voices given sufficient hearing?

- (iv) Should/could there be one ideal model of the 'liberated woman'? Can 'liberation' mean the same for an urban upper class Indian woman and a Dalit woman whose sole preoccupation is survival? Does feminism with its universalistic structure has the resource to cater to these diverse social groups with diverse particularistic needs? Can a feminist who do not belong to the lower strata of the society champion the cause of these underprivileged women? Do they not get involved in the representational politics?

While feminism is increasingly becoming the glib talk of the academic intelligentsia, the need of the hour is culture-conscious practising feminists with a specified vision who would revolutionise the 'thinking' of the patriarchal society.

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