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A Paradoxical Interpretation of Postmodern Feminism

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Abstract

The research paper highlights the decentralized innovations of *Postmodernism* in feminism. This is known as 'Postmodern Feminism'. Postmodern Feminism aims to prove that 'Men' and 'Women' are *matters of language*, socially constructed entities having no biological and gender differences as men and women. Postmodern Feminists attempt to change the entire scenario of 'Feminism' by placing the idea of '*Removal of Boundaries between the sexes*' and gender as a mere 'linguistic issue'. The emergence of 'Queer Theory, Lesbians and Gays' are the bright inventions of this Postmodern Feminism. This very concept of treating gender beyond gender, leads to the idea of the '*Death of Gender*'. This '*Death of Gender*' ultimately leads to the '*Death of Feminism*'. Feminism deals with the identity and social problems of women. Hence it can be said that the edifice of Feminism is standing on the pillar of '*Identity*'. This '*slippage of sexes*' and *gender beyond the gender* are confusing, rather removing the idea of identity. So in this Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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manner, these stunning beliefs of ‘Postmodernism’ are devising a *paradox* of feminism with the title of ‘*Postmodern Feminism*’.

Key Words: *Gender, Discursive Construction, Paradox, Postmodern Feminism, Removal of Boundaries, Identity,*

Introduction

‘A Paradoxical Interpretation of Postmodern Feminism’ aims to highlight the effects of Postmodernists’ agendas on Feminism. Most probably the ‘Gender Politics’ of Postmodernism has made a strong impact on the practices of ‘Feminists’ theoretical framework’. In its attempt to decentralize the phenomena, it has caused a great threat to the existence of many of the disciplines and ideologies. Feminism is one of them. This research paper brings into lime light the growing trends, which strictly criticize and discourage the ‘*Gender Politics*’ of Postmodern feminists. It tries to prove the term ‘Postmodern Feminism’, as a mere Paradox. Feminism and Postmodernism can never go side by side. Whatever is feminist is not Postmodernist, as ‘Postmodern Feminism is’ the second name for ‘Politicizing Sexual and Gender Practices’.

A Cursory Examination of Postmodernism

A cursory analysis of postmodernism can clarify a fact that it lacks gender. So the postmodern feminism introduces a new kind of utopian gender-free and fanciful paradigm for feminists. (Ahmad 14) Postmodern feminists were all inspired by the postmodern project of deconstructing the modernist philosophical conventions, while all these theories of the race, class, and gender were motivated by the contemporary feminist policies which are better to be called as feminist politics. For several poststructuralist feminists, this essentialism of sex and gender was the basic issue of contention. (Davis 73)

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Postmodern approaches lay a great stress, therefore on that performative shifts, can parody the dominant norms, exposing their own performativity. This means that purportedly queer activities like drag for instance, have the potential to reveal the arbitrariness of conventional gender distinctions and identities(which seems a bit paradoxical) by parodying and so undermining them. (Tyler 15)

Liberal Feminism

Theoretically arguing, liberal feminism claims for so many fantasies like that gender differences are not any kind of hard and fast differences. They also claim that these gender differences are not biology based, and therefore men and women are not at all that different -- the common humanity of both these creatures, supersedes their procreative differentiation. Lorber argues in the critique of the agenda of postmodern feminism in the way: "If women and men are not different, then they should not be treated differently under the law". (Lorber 9)

What the stunning postmodernism has done is a bit terrific. According to Paul, this mighty postmodern feminism has given a great blow to his ideologies. It has made this world a place where both men and women can be anything other than 'Human'. (Paul 109)

By drawing the attention towards these absences and these erased privileges, the role of feminism in its engagement with postmodernism is absolutely transformative. It has changed the soul and the shape of the entire scenario of feminism. Furthermore it has drawn the attention to the divisions within feminism. (Ahmad 15)

In fact it is certainly, not the case that gender and sex have merged into any background, but rather that there is now a recognition that Sex and gender are fully and inextricably imbricate with all the other phenomena and all the other quasi-structural and discursive inequalities which are at work in our entire lives. The

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need for this kind of critique is no doubt interminable. (Shildrik 71)

Genderless Feminism – Gender as Social Status

To study postmodernism as a gender free paradigm, is really very different from taking it as an actively constructing gender as absent. (Ahmad 15) The 'exclusions' in this paradigm of postmodern feminism refers to the exclusion of other identities and other ways of being, which mobilization around a single female identity is in danger of replicating. (Hepburn 'par' 28)

Gender these days, is understood as a social status, a personal identity, and it is understood as a set of relationships between man and woman, and among women and men. Sex is not existing now, it is no longer seen as a one-way input or a basic stuff for the sake of social arrangements, but a very complex interplay of hormones, genes, physiology, behavior and environment, with loop-back effects. Sexuality is now understood to be physiologically based and socially constructed phenomenon, which is expressed emotionally. (Lorber 8)

Jane Flax (1997: 174) claims that it is basically the diversity in the movement (postmodernism) which has brought about the paradoxical but the most important advance in feminist theory. The inability in reaching to a conclusive and satisfactory answer on the meaning of the term 'gender' has meant that the very recognition and existence of the gender relations has been problematized. Now the 'gender' can no longer be treated as simply a natural fact. (Snowdon 4)

Benhabib while commenting on the ground breaking politics of postmodern feminism argues that there is nothing like gender now, and there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender these days; that identity of postmodern feminists' is now performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. If this view of the self by postmodern feminists is adopted then is there any possibility of the change of those very

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“expressions” which constitute us? If we are what we are doing and performing and have no biological reality of ourselves then, is there ever will be any chance for stopping this performance for a while, to pull this curtain down, and let it rise only, if one can have a say in the production of the play, itself?(Benhabib 21)

Replacing Unitary Ideas

The issue of identity is analyzed and perceived by the postmodern feminists in their own ways. The way they have taken, is marked by the soul of postmodernism. They have tried to replace these unitary ideas about identity with the more fluid variety of postmodernism. The postmodern politics have thus treated gender as other phenomena like race, class, sexuality and ethnicity. (Hepburn ‘par’ 22)

Lorber while emphasizing on the importance of ‘gender conformity’ argues that it is gender conformity which supports the gendered social order of the society, but it is the deviance and diversity which challenge it. These are the binaries define identity and there is no identity outside the binaries of girl/boy- woman/man. (Lorber 9) Criticizing the notions of postmodern politics Benhabib thinks that it is necessary to criticize the unrealistic and superficial reservations of postmodern feminists on the issue of gender and sex, specially their concept of heterosexuality and dualist positions in the women movement. (Benhabib 21)

Gender difference is extremely important as it builds a social order with in society. Gender system developed by the nature is very strong, the bounds of gender are irresistible. We do gender, we perform and assert our gender. We participate in its construction, once we have learned to take our place as a member of a gendered social order. So considering it as absent is just like living in a utopia. (Lorber 9)

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Undermining the Possibility of Feminism

Postmodern feminism in one way or the other has many versions. A certain version of postmodernism is not only incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women. (Benhabib 29)

Thus speaking in another way, the postmodernism does deconstruct, but doesn't really reconstruct. No feminist is happy with that kind of potential quietism, even if she (or he) approves of the deconstructing impulse: you simply can't stop there. (O,Grady 'par' 13) Hutcheon's analysis is a bit diverse; that feminisms have pushed postmodern theory and art into the directions they might not otherwise have headed. (Hutcheon 171)) Men and women are social entities that are defined in relation to each other and cannot exist without the opposing category (Jakson 135).

Feminist writer Martha Nussbaum damned Butler's 'hip defeatism' in the right wing magazine '*New Republic*'. Nussbaum has interpreted Butler's work on a new horizon. According to her it is in fact a sexualized spin on Baudliare's celebration of stupidity as the only possible postmodern revolt. (Aldred 1) The postmodernists' thought through their conclusions may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women's movements altogether. (Benhabib 20)

Battles over Problems of Identity

Many battles have been fought among the different groups of feminists over the issue of identity—from what standpoint should one speak, if at all? The problem, of course, is that "it has now become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective. The consciousness of

exclusion through naming is acute. The identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic. (Haraway 'par' 12)

Thus this mighty postmodernism and its feminist politics are seemed committed to undermine the commitment of feminists to the women agency and a sense of selfhood. The redefinition of gender, removal of sex and the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender, are all fake. In one way or the other, it undermines the very soul of feminism. It contains two things together an endless variety and the monotonous similarity.(Benhabib 29)

Feminist knowledge can never claim to be wholly objective because it is founded upon a political understanding of the women's situation as one of oppression. (Jackson 151) Postmodernism has not theorized agency; it has no proper strategies of resistance that would correspond to the feminist ones. (Hatcheon 168) Postmodernism can teach us the theoretical and political traps of why utopias and foundational thinking can go wrong, but it should not lead to a retreat from utopia altogether. For we, as women, have much to lose by giving up the utopian hope in the wholly other. (Benhabib 30)

Postmodernism in its agenda of challenging the Meta-narratives and Master-narratives intentionally or unintentionally has challenged the spirit of Feminism in the shape of Postmodern Feminism. By killing the issue of 'Identity', it has also exterminated the urgency of any feminist movement. In one way or the other everyone has tried to express the reluctance in accepting the Postmodern feminist agenda of the *removal of boundaries between the sexes*. By covering the issue with a sweeping term *gender*, Postmodern feminists are caught in their own web. 'Gender' according to some feminist Theorists mainly including Butler and her followers is a material reality. To associate it with the issue of performativity is ridiculous rather illogical. Every individual has a right to establish oneself in the society according to one's own will. But if we remove the '*mighty term gender*' and sexual difference between the sexes, it will ultimately

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cause a chaos in the society. ‘*Death of sex/gender*’ will ultimately lead to the ‘*Death of Feminism*’. The whole feminist practice is marked by an endless struggle for a ‘*separate identity*’. It is a race for asserting oneself as a *Female* before the entire society.

Claim for the Removal of the Boundary

There can be a possibility for Postmodern feminists’ claim for the ‘*Removal of the Boundaries between sexes*’. Perhaps under the strong effects of postmodern movement, the Postmodern Feminists are highly influenced by Nietzsche’s philosophy of the *Death of God*. By taking the *gender as a dead entity and by considering it as a performative issue*, they have earnestly tried to violate the norms of nature somehow. The emergence of new horizons (Lesbianism and Gays) has left a heap of questions, unanswered. Why the gender is still needed to be performed for its identity, when it has no more significance in our lives? If we have no space for gender in our society then why should we go for its performance and assertion?

Postmodern Feminism

‘Postmodern Feminism’ is often associated with Butler’s work (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) on textualizing the ‘*gender*’. She has tried to prove it as an issue of ‘*discursive construction*’ and performance. Her theories criticize the conflation of sex and gender, essential generalization regarding men and women and an approach to view gender as a fixed element or entity. She in her attempt has tried to get rid of that ‘*essentialism*’. This is the spirit of Postmodernism to revolt against the absoluteness and essentialism of any phenomenon. But ‘Feminism’ is all about the essential views of softer sex towards the opposite sex. Feminism is marked by the issue of ‘*identity*’. Separate identity and rights of women to grow and move freely in the society, are the focal issues of feminism. When Postmodern Feminism, talks about the removal of these essential boundaries between sexes by considering it as performative issue, it eventually kills the element of ‘*an identity for women*’. If there is no question of *feminine identity*; then there is no question for *rights*. If Men and Women are equal and are not essentially different from each other then there is no need for a slogan of ‘*Women’s Rights*’. In this way the *mighty Postmodern*

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Feminism’ becomes a *Paradox*. It is a weapon using its potentials for the destruction of itself. It’s a self-destructive entity.

A Sacrificial Entity, Kaleidoscopic Patterns

To be a woman means a sacrificial entity. Being a woman, whether she belongs to any corner of this world, the creature has to sacrifice so many precious things in her life. She has to struggle a lot in order to prove herself. She has so many faces, and so many roles to play. Each of the roles demands a specific sort of skill to perform it. Men, on the other hand, too have many roles to play but they always remain *men*. A woman at a time has to be responsible for her womanhood. If she is a mother she is thought to leave no stone unturned to bring comfort to her children. If she is a wife she is expected to satisfy the needs of her husband. If she is a house wife, there are various demands upon her to be responsible for all the ups and downs in her territory (household). And if she is a working woman, then again she is expected to manage all the above mentioned responsibilities along with her job. Still she always seems *proud of what she is*.

In all these varied, kaleidoscopic patterns of her life, the issues which are addressed by Feminism have proved to be a ray of hope for her. Hope for *progress*, hope for *identity*, hope for *individuality*, and hope for being *acknowledged by the society*. ‘Postmodern Feminism’ though trying to bring versatility in the practices of feminism, irrespective of its outcomes, has made itself a *Paradox of Feminism*.

‘Postmodern Feminism’ has tried to remove the essentialism of sexes, by removing the essential boundaries between sexes, and by proving sex and gender as socially constructed entities. But who knows, *is it not an essentialism to remove the essentialism?* How can ‘Postmodern Feminism’ be irrational, when it provides so many rationales for itself? Why ‘Postmodern Feminism’ avoids adopting the mid-way? Why remove the boundaries when they

are developed by nature? Here we see that it is not only Paradoxical, but it *violates the natural orders*.

‘Postmodern Feminism’ should not go against the natural orders. It should try to innovate Feminism by introducing new horizons for women to fly. It should *accept* woman *as she is* instead of *resisting her identity* by removing differences. It should attempt to resist patriarchal hold by *discouraging* it and by *debunking* it. It should try to bring equality in rights not essentially on biological grounds but on social, cultural, economical and academic grounds as well. There can be so many other possibilities to promote feminism other than politicization of it. This politicization has killed gender, and so also Feminism by the hands of ‘Postmodern Feminism’. The emergence of *Post feminism* is one of the blessings of ‘*Postmodern Feminism*’, which can be better titled as ‘*Anti Feminism*’.

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