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Contesting Andocentric Conceptions - For Freedom from Fixed Identities

Suman Lata, Ph.D. and Trisha Sharma, M.Phil.

Multiplicity of Meanings for *Feminism*

Feminism is not a unitary concept. It cannot be described as an integrated movement or a single coherent trajectory of thought. In recognition of its multiplicity the word *feminism* has been replaced with *feminisms* in contemporary literary theory. Any attempt to provide a baseline definition of the common basis of feminisms may start with the assertion that feminisms concern themselves with women's inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore, one could argue that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women.

The Equality/Difference Debate

There is however, one central question that emerges from the feminist debates, and that is the question of the meaning of equality for feminism and more precisely the opposition between

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equality and *difference*. Sexual difference has been a constitutive factor in our society for as long as we can remember, feminists struggling to redefine women's place in society must come up against the problem of how to theorize this difference and how to deal with its consequences in practice. The equality/difference debate reckons with the question that whether women should struggle to be equal to men or whether they should valorize their differences from men. And if women want to valorize their differences then are these natural, biological differences or differences that are the result of particular social and economic conditions? The words equality and difference are themselves contested terms and with a multitude of meanings. Nevertheless, one major consequence of the assumed difference between women and men is the stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity. For many feminists the route to women's emancipation goes through the deconstruction of the discourse of femininity. This paper is an attempt to explore the construct of femininity, to emphasize its delimiting nature and elucidate the various positions taken by feminists pertaining to the concept of femininity.

Biological Difference, Sex and Gender

For centuries biological difference between men and women has been the starting point and justification for the creation of different social roles for women and men. Not only was women's biological capacity for childbirth and their lesser physical strength seen as determining their social role in the home, occupying themselves with domestic chores and bringing up children, but it was also claimed that these biological differences made them unfit to participate in the public sphere. Women were judged to be less rational than men, more ruled by emotion and thus incapable for political decision making, for example. Faced with such justification to exclude women from areas of socio-political significance, many feminists begin to question the association of biological difference with distribution of distinctive social roles to men and women. They began to weigh the veracity of supposedly inherent masculine and feminine traits. Such attempts led to the differentiation in feminist theory between biological *sex* and social *gender*. In her book *Sex, Gender and Society*, Ann Oakley vividly defines this difference:

Sex is a word that refers to the biological difference between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function.

Gender, however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into *masculine* and *feminine*.

(Oakley 16)

Historical Creations of Differences

Feminists argued that whereas biological sex was a naturally occurring difference, the roles and modes of behaviour associated with being a woman were historical creations of patriarchal societies. Simone De Beauvoir's distinction between *sex* and *gender* is the precursor of the distinction between biological *sex* and social *gender* in feminist theory.

Toril Moi makes a corresponding distinction between *female* and *feminine*. She describes the former as a matter of *nature* and the latter as a product of *nurture* (209). In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir's famous pronouncement that *one is not born a woman, one becomes one* encapsulates the argument that woman's inferior position is not a natural or biological fact but one that is created by society. One may be born as a *female* but it is civilization that creates *woman*. Society decides what is *feminine* and prescribes how women should act and behave. The social roles and modes of behaviour assigned to women have been the cause of their oppression and have kept them in an inferior position to that of men. Women's apparently lesser physical strength, and the assumption of their being closer to nature in their physiology and psyche has been used in determining their social role in the home and their exclusion from sites of power in the public sphere.

On the other hand, men have been perceived as closer to culture and therefore, more suited for public roles and political association. One constant of this difference has been that women have been given an inferior or secondary status in societies because of assumed sexual difference. As Sherry Ortner argues: "The secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact."

The Role of Patriarchal Oppression

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Patriarchal oppression imposes certain social standards of femininity on all biological women in order to prove that these standards for femininity are natural. Consequently, a woman who does not conform to the chosen standards is critiqued as un-feminine and abnormal. As Judith Butler puts it:

When a member of the muted group dares to raise her voice, refuses to confirm to andocentric modes of behaviour ... she is termed as deviant ... and excluded from the (patriarchal) symbolic order.

(qtd. in Culler 102)

Essence of Femaleness?

To make women believe that there is such a thing as essence of femaleness, called femininity, serves the interests of patriarchy. By the compulsory repetition of gendered patterns of behaviour women are made to believe the authenticity of the discourse of femininity and are thereby, interpolated as subjects who hegemonically contribute in their own exploitation.

Phallogocentric Societies

Femininity is the construct of phallogocentric societies. It can be defined as the stereotypical perception of woman from the male point of view. Woman has primarily been viewed as a physical being. Hence, the prescribed coda of feminine virtues such as subservience, coyness, patience, tolerance, modesty, etc is such that it would prepare women for enacting the imposed functions of nurturers and sex objects, simultaneously making them unfit to play the roles men have reserved for themselves.

The discourses of femininity and masculinity are built upon a system of binary oppositions. Since all andocentric cultures assume the superiority of men over women, in oppositions such as active/passive, subject/object, the second term has been traditionally associated with women. The Bulgarian feminist Helene Cixous rejects these binary oppositions as death-dealing” (115) for she pertinently observes that in such dualistic equations “woman is either passive or she does not exist.”(118)

Redefining the Traits of New Women

For these reasons some feminists have advocated redefining the traits of the new women, from her own point of view and thus imbue the notion of femininity with positivity and power, hitherto reserved for men. Most feminist theorists, however refuse to define femininity and for valid reasons.

Alternative Theory

The first and foremost being the fact that women world-over do not have a unitary identity. Difference in parameters such as race, ethnicity, class, education, age, etc., accounts for the heterogeneity of women's identity on this planet. So, an alternative theory of female values would be reductive and would simply play the patriarchal game.

Secondly, when we decide to re-vision femininity we inadvertently retain the binary mould which is never neutral, rather, hinges on hierarchies. It is for this reason that Cixous emphasizes the necessity of doing away with the patriarchal metaphysics of binaries. Against any binary scheme of thought, she sets multiple heterogeneous difference of *difference*. Whether it is Cixous's proposition of abandoning the binary scheme or the stand of other feminists like Kristeva who refuse to define femininity at all, all feminists find the discourse of femininity constrictive and advocate dismantling it in the practical world as well, outside the domain of theory.

Freedom from Normative and Fixed Identities

A complete freedom from normative and fixed identities will come about gradually and with difficulty. Nevertheless, the many attempts by feminists to dismantle the delimiting discourse of femininity have had a liberating effect on women's lives world over. Men are also amongst its beneficiaries. In the 1850s a working woman was either unheard of or an exception. Men brought home the bacon and women were mastering the art of cooking it and nurturing children.

Thanks to liberalization and feminism, women have jumped out of their closets and into the field. They have proved themselves not merely as good as but even better than men in previously male dominated professions. There has been an incredible growth of educated women with

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access to equal opportunities. The traditional idea of man's work or woman's work is slowly fading away.

Change in the Mindset of Men

There has also been a considerable change in the mindset of men in most societies. Men help their working wives in keeping the home and raising children. Some men in the West are exploring the possibility of being *house husbands*, *home engineers* or *stay at home dads*. In this recent phenomenon of role-swapping women become the bread-winners while men by choice or temperamental preference decide to manage the household. Men are also fast stepping out of the mould of masculinity. They feel free to express themselves. Personal care and grooming is not limited to women anymore. Terms like manicure, waxing, haircolouring, etc which would half a century ago be categorized as women's affairs have become gender-neutral activities today.

Culturally Constructed Identity

Feminist theorists and psychologists have made us aware that sexual identity is not an inborn biological essence but an unstable subject position, socially and culturally constructed. There has been a movement in the modern world from "the orderly surface of strict distinctions and laid down structures" to "the realm of floating signifiers" and differences (Jacques Lacan, qtd in Barry 129). We seem to be swiftly heading towards a world-order where gender roles will be "malleable and changeable, not inevitable and unchangeable" (Sigmund Freud, qtd in Barry 131), where identities will not be imposed and both men and women will feel free to exercise choices.

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