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A Dissent Study on Gender Studies in India

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To theorize the basic distinction among the terms ‘Sex’, ‘Gender’ and ‘Feminism’; Sex speaks about the biological differences between male and female bodies which come by birth and Gender shows the culture, sociological and political dominance of male bodies in society where female bodies are undervalued and demoralized in the name of sensitivity, shyness and physically unfit. If so, Feminism, as a theory questions the gender dominance and the distinction in the name of sex. The contention of the paper is to analyse the genesis of the Gender studies in Indian context and to argue about certain exclusions.

To start with studying the difference between sex and gender, Nivedita Menon a feminist critic argues, “The initial move was to use the term sex to refer to the biological differences between men and women, while gender indicated the vast range of cultural meanings attached to that basic difference.” Further she states that this kind of distinction is important for feminism to mark because the subordination of women had been fundamentally justified on the grounds of the biological differences between men and women. So it is understood that the sex and gender distinction has been further developed into feminist theory.

There is also a debate whether feminism is a theory or a critical practice. Roman Seldom Peter, Widow Son and Peter Brooker are of the opinion, “Indeed, some feminists have not wished to embrace theory at all, precisely because, in academic institutions theory is male.”

Marry Eagleton, a prominent feminist critic argues, “A suspicion of theory...throughout feminism’, because of its tendency to reinforce the hierarchical binary opposition between an ‘impersonal’, ‘disinterested’, ‘objective’, ‘public’, ‘male’ theory, and a ‘personal’, ‘subjective’, ‘private’, ‘female’ experience.”

In this context, Feminism, either a theory or a practice, means contradiction, interchange, debate based on a series of creative oppositions, of critiques and counter-critiques. It also means challenging, subverting and expanding not only other (male) theories but also its own positions and agenda.

John Mc Leed in his polemical book *Beginning Post Colonialism (2007)* writes that both feminism and post-colonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression. He further studies feminism is to be studied in three phases:

The ‘First World’ referred to the rich, predominantly Western nations in Europe, America and Australasia, the ‘Second World’ denoted the Soviet Union and its communist allies; while the ‘Third World’ consisted in the main of the former

colonies such as countries in Africa and South Asia which were economically underdeveloped and dependent upon the wealthy nations for their economic fortunes.

Another literary critic and theorist Peter Barry argues in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2008) that in Feminist Criticism in the 1970s, the major effort went into exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy as the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Peter Barry also studies that since 1980s there are certain changes in the approach of feminism. Firstly its attachment with other kinds of criticism like Marxism, Structuralism, Linguistics and so on. Secondly its focus is on attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience and thirdly its need to construct a new canon of women's writing by re-writing the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers and providing them a new prominence.

To have a brief introduction on Western notions of the feminism, in the Western feminism history of women is found in three phases. Elaine Showalter, an American literary critic, studies the history of women writing into three phases: 1) A Feminine phase (1840–80) in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards 2) A Feminist phase (1880–1920) in which radical and often separatist positions are mentioned and 3) A Female phase (since 1920) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience.

Mainly the arguments rose by the Western born feminist criticism are against the three fold dominance by the men. According to Peter Barry, "Debates and disagreements have centered on three particular areas, these being: the role of theory; the nature of language, and the value or otherwise of psychoanalysis." Many feminist writers interrogated the male dominated language. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of one's own* (1929) argues that women's writing should explore female experience in its own right and not from a comparative assessment of women's experience, therefore it aimed at discovering linguistic ways of describing the confined life of women.

Dale Spender in *Man Made Language* (1980) also argues that women have been fundamentally oppressed by a male dominated language. From Dale Spender's point of view, it is understood that women writers need to contest men's control of language rather than create a separate feminine discourse.

Many western feminist writers and critics argued against the Gender dominance in Literature, Art, Culture and Politics. One among them is Simone De Beauvoir, a French feminist writer and critic. Simone De Beauvoir in her highly influential book *The Second Sex* (1949) deals with the biological, psychological, economic and other kinds of discrimination against women. Especially the statement made by her, 'I am a woman': no man would do so' traces out the intension of the writer that she wants to question the gender dominance. She studies the distinction between the sex and the gender and sees the interaction between social and natural functions of the sex and the gender with reference to literature. She writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole text produces this creature...Only the interaction of someone else can establish an individual as one 'other'.

Western born feminist critical theory has been divided into many sub-theories and these new schools of feminist thoughts started questioning the dominance of gender in their respective countries. Like feminism in France, Australia, America and in other African Countries, it has also strong its roots in India. Contemporary critics Kamla Bhasin and Nishat Said Khan opine in their polemical article that feminism is based on historically and culturally concentrate realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions.

In Indian Context, Feminism means, an awareness against the women's oppression and writing their experiences of exploitation in male dominated society especially at work places, at home. It also builds awareness among women to change the situation of women subjugation and suppression on the basis of gender, patriarchy.

Kamala Bhasin and Nishat Said Khan view that today feminists have given beyond mere legal reforms to end discrimination and working for the emancipation of women. They further argue, "Present day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home. They also add that Feminists are not only asking and fighting for the 'equality' of women, but for a just and equitable society both for women and men.

Prominent Critic Madhu Kishwar article in *A Horror of 'Isms': Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist* draws a similar line between Western Feminism and Feminism in India. She writes, "In the West, feminism undoubtedly played a liberating role for women..., feminism evolved from women's own struggles against oppressive power structures which excluded them from equal participation in many aspects of the economic, social and political life of their society – for example, denial of the right to vote or exclusion from universities and other professional institutions. As a result, important component of western feminism has been a radical and anti – authoritarian thrust."

Madhu Kishwar further studies that in India new opportunities were made available for a small number of western educated women who gravitated towards feminism. Madhu Kishwar's study on 'Isms' made one think that Indian feminism is Western imported and failed in studying the sociological problems that come across sex and gender dominance. Hence, Indian feminism is failed in studying women in the light of Caste, it could be called the exclusivist feminism.

Conclusion

It is understood from both the Western and the Indian feminists fought for their entry into educational institutions, to vote and employment and ignored the social boycott that has been experienced by Dalit and tribal women. Though they partly touch the issues of caste in the light of Gender, their experiences of caste is objective and not subjective like the experiences of the Dalit women. In this context, it is important to study that Dalit and Tribal women are excluded from voting, education and employment in the name of caste. So it is essential to study Indian feminism in the light of the caste which paved the way for Dalit women writing from below and 'Dalit Gender Writings' as a discipline is the result.

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