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Indigenous Feminism on a Trajectory of Inclusive Feminism

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This research paper analyses how indigenous feminism is on a path that leads to an inclusive form of feminism. This is a form of feminism that combines both western as well as indigenous feminism. When indigenous women started writing about themselves, their central obvious aim was to communicate the pain of oppression at various levels, not just the levels that western feminism concentrates on. Some women critics who call themselves as hardcore feminists argue that if women can do everything just as men, then all is well. But this is not the version of a liveable reality. If it is conceptualised thus in the name of equality of sexes, then the relationship between men and women will become something like a battlefield beyond redemption. The unique identity of a woman will also be lost. Advocating a complimentary gender role proves to be important to the contemporary world.

In a life with various activities, man and woman have been created to manage it in a balanced way. So they take to activities that suit their biological makeup. But as civilization dawns anew on mankind, it has dangerous impacts on women and their role as the better half within an equalized pattern. In order to counter this, feminists emerge and they become a group, as Price says: “. . . committed to being a force for change in women’s interests” (6).

Though certain feministic thoughts explicated in western feminism apply universally, most of them do not stand for the cause of the Aboriginal or Native women. Their experiences are different, but are overlooked by some white feminist theorists. The impact of racism has been ignored or undervalued by some, while some others have distanced themselves from it by saying that it is something related to the patriarchal structures. Race has not been a critical category within the feminist thought till about the 1980s. For feminism to be globally effective and participatory for all women, the twin legacies of sexism and racism is a necessary part of feminism. Differences in race, class and sexual orientation become some central thoughts that add racism and classism to the feminist thought. In the postcolonial era, race, ethnicity, class and geography are slowly included in the analytical areas within feminism.

Indigenous feminism or postcolonial feminism tries to change vulnerable and ignorant women and take them to the status of being knowledgeable and empowered women. When Aboriginal women started writing about themselves, their central obvious aim was to communicate the pain of oppression at various levels, not just the levels that western feminism concentrates on. In the process of communicating their pain, unlike white feminists, the coloured women started representing the oppression of women with due importance to the racial oppression of their men and their land in general. They

transformed their years of silence into that of productive speech, exposing their reality of experiences. Their literature started redefining their distorted image and also exposed and changed “. . . the barriers thrown up by patriarchy and racism to self-knowledge, self-love and individual wholeness” (Hedrick 63).

One important argument that comes from indigenous feminists is that whatever affects indigenous women affect all indigenous people. Indigenous feminism does not want to be recognized only within the realms of indigenous studies and women’s studies, but also in physical Aboriginal and native communities. Basically, Indigenous feminists operate from a viewpoint that indigenous women are not only affected by sexism, but also by racism, classism and colonialism. These are areas of oppression that are mostly ignored by mainstream feminism. This aspect triggers a structure of differences that makes most Indigenous feminists to restrain from calling themselves as feminists.

In the beginning feminism is seen as against men by indigenous women. This misconception prevented most women from identifying themselves as feminists. Those who did were termed ‘assimilated’, ‘white’ ‘traitors’ or ‘colonial’ in sense. Some were dealt with political and social ostracisation, violent threats and other tactics like stopping them from attending programmes, in funding and many more. Initially for indigenous women, fighting for survival and sovereignty proved to be important rather than for injustices against women. It has been a rare experience to hear the voices of Aboriginal women in public domain. Very slowly, indigenous women started realizing the detrimental effects of patriarchy affecting not just them, but their entire community. Answering to the misconception of feminism by Aboriginal women, Kuokkanen says, “We also have to stop falling prey to superficial, stereotypical misconstructions of feminism and its objectives as ‘anti-men’” (86). She wants Aboriginal women to reclaim it as one of the strategies for restoring their communities and strengthening their people. So she says, “instead of retreating behind the barricades of assumed incommensurable differences, it would be more fruitful to recognize the similarities in the various struggles against colonial and patriarchal subjugation” (86).

Once the misconceptions are blurred, Aboriginal feminism takes ground and it foreshadows the importance of certain feministic thought. Aboriginal women writers like Kate Shanley, Andrea Smith, Luana Ross, Lee Maracle, Renya Ramirez, Joyce Green, Cheryl Suzack, Shari Huhndorf, Khaulani Kauanui, Myrna Cunningham, Verna St. Denis, Aileen Moreton Robinson, Patricia Monture, Grace Ouellette, Phyllis kaberry, O’Shane, S. Payne, Helen Boyle, Jorunn Eikiok, Winona la Duke, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Rebecca Walker, Chilla Bellbeck, and Sara Suleri emerge to the forefront in analyzing feminism, creating a separate canon as Indigenous feminism and also in advocating the necessity of an inclusive form of feminism. Feminism has brought a sense of purpose to their existence. Though many do not identify themselves as feminists, it offers them a kind of a substantiation and empowerment against that of being made to feel unvalued.

During colonization, indigenous women were portrayed negatively as lewd and licentious through all kinds of media. This legitimated the legal constraints placed on

indigenous women. European male dominance left indigenous women in the open to be abandoned and abused. They were projected as disposable with no inherent value. This remains in existence even today, though less in intense. Indigenous motherhood was also distorted with the production of mixed race children. The children were associated with all negative qualities inherited from the indigenous mother. Extremely lesser thought is given to the mainstream blood running in their veins. They were physically and morally marred with mediocre qualities of the matrilineal pattern.

Since the 1970s, Indigenous women hold that colonization has removed them from positions of power. It has replaced the traditional gender roles with western patriarchal practices that deal with women's bodies in an outrageous manner of sexual violence. Indigenous women do not have a single culture, but they have a common history of colonization. The conception of indigenous feminism centres on the factors that have diminished Indigenous women's power, status and material condition. Indigenous feminists on a larger scale want feminism to "seek ultimately to attain social justice not only along gender lines but also along those of race, class, and sexuality" (Huhndorf and Suzack 5). But people like Kathie Irwin are not happy about feminism. She bemoans the fact that the Aboriginal woman's "realities are rarely integrated into the thinking of those designing the 'big picture'" (182). But most others appreciate it, though not accepting it as it is.

Aboriginal femininity is a celebrated aspect among Aboriginal feminists. It is associated with growth, fertility, life-giving and nourishment. In 1995, Winnona la Duke delivered a famous speech on behalf of indigenous women at the United Nation's Conference on Women in Beijing in which she connects Mother Earth to the 'uterus'. It is something that gives the ability to give birth to children. To this, Jorunn, Eikiok comments: "I would characterize this as "uterus feminism" – very reactionary!" (117). He further says that Indigenous women must not think about seeking equality but have to focus on their right to be different. He also wants women to create their own space in society.

Aboriginal feminists also note the fact that the experiences of indigenous Women are grounded in a different history from what is known in the white domains. It is a subjugated knowledge and experience on various levels. This has been legally sanctioned and enforced through policies of assimilation. Biological and cultural inferiority are used as criteria to separate and displace children from their mothers, families and land. "The body for Indigenous women is the link to people, country, spirits, her story and the future, and is a positive site of value and affirmation as well as a site of resistance" (Robinson 15). So being rooted to one's native land is vital for indigenous women. Indigenous woman's sexuality has also been treated "as being excessive, promiscuous and animalistic" (Robinson 16), in western patriarchal texts. Patriarchy is one thing that has pinned down indigenous women as completely powerless.

In general patriarchal societies favour men over women in matters of decision making, positions of authority, and ownership of property. Patriarchy is so firmly established in societies across the globe that it not only overlooks, but also sanctions the

control and abuse of women. When the history of male dominance is considered, men are seen promoting their own self interest and they easily exclude women from the economic and political system. The frustration men undergo is emptied on woman in the form of violence and abuse. This naturally leads to the objectification of women and to their being merely considered as sexual playmates. So patriarchy has become a system that is so difficult to be unlearned because it has been in existence for long. When humanness is negated by men, it does immense damage to gender relationships. At this point women collectively began noticing their subjugated selves and as a result, feminism emerges as a response to male dominance. This root structure of response slowly adds on and takes the form as numerous forms of response.

Patriarchy works at almost all levels. Feminist theories have pointed out how “patriarchy [is] at work in the home, the state, religious institutions, the law, education systems, the work-place, in culture at large and even in women themselves, since women as well as men are formed under patriarchy and come to subjecthood under its aegis” (Robbins 15). Undertaking various forms of expression including literature, women have been able to expose patriarchy at work at various levels though, “. . . patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women’s experience, rendering them visible is clearly an important anti-patriarchal strategy” (Moi 121). Aboriginal women advocating Indigenous feminism have also done the same and they claim that, if men of colour are truly committed to the emancipation of their race, they must recognize the oppressive nature of patriarchy and work towards liberating their women from it.

Aboriginal women in the first place do not accept that male domination or patriarchy is universal. They challenge this assumption by pointing to the historical Aboriginal cultural belief systems and practices that had earlier given respectable positions to women in their respective societies, for they had “positions of authority, autonomy and high status in their communities” (Denis 37). Denise K. Henning validates this point when he says:

For thousands of years my people have lived in a matriarchal, matrilineal and matrilocal society. This female-centered society kept our nation grounded. . . . Women were held in the highest regard amongst our villages, played critical roles within decision-making processes and had access to and wielded many forms of power – all a direct result of the bonds of the matrilineal inheritance. (188-89)

Such egalitarian cultural traditions are less concerned with the equality of sexes and give more importance to the dignity and rights of the individual. So as Verna St. Denis says, the “concept of equality is neither relevant nor necessary for Aboriginal women in Aboriginal societies; rather these are concepts imposed by the colonizers, including feminists” (38). Recent indigenous feminists and women scholars have discussed feminism from their own point of view. Aboriginal feminist writing “looks both at the genesis of colonialism and its consequences, and at the internalization and perpetuation of colonial practices within Aboriginal communities, especially male dominance over women and children” (Green 23).

Dian Million asserts that indigenous women are often seen as being promiscuous by mainstream western societies, and so indigenous feminists are heaped with a burden to prove that such stereotypes are not true. This is almost same as what Andrea Smith says that in the eyes of mainstream western societies, indigenous women are 'inherently rapable'. The mainstream narrative notes that indigenous women not only suffer abuses from mainstreamers but also within their indigenous communities.

Domestic and sexual violence is also on a high rate. In an attempt to explain this, Devon Mihesuah offers an explanation that states that the loss of traditional gender roles has made indigenous men to feel useless and powerless. This has made them take to drinking, violence and what Mihesuah calls as 'woman-hating'. This justification is not accepted by all indigenous feminists like Emma LaRocque who denies this as a feasible excuse for domestic violence. She very strongly advocates that indigenous men who are abusive must be held fully responsible for their actions. While Verna St. Denis is concerned with the direct effects of patriarchy on indigenous people, Andrea Smith expands it and includes the indirect effects of western patriarchal ideologies. Another important point often explicated by indigenous feminists is that, the indigenous women's rights should not be left behind in the quest for tribal sovereignty.

According to Grace Ouellette, she is not able to "See a female – dominated group making decisions for just women because they too have males in their lives" (135-36). She however does not deny ideas like: "Aboriginal Women should definitely become involved in all areas, including economic development" (131). Chandra Talpade Mohanty a postcolonial feminist, regards women as a single group "on the basis of a shared oppression" (56). But what fails to be understood is that gender is not the only form of oppression against women. So Mohanty argues: "Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender, it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis" (58).

Executing physical violence against women is carried out by all men, be it a white or a black or Asian or whoever it may be. It can also be seen under universal relationships too, be it a brother, a father, an uncle, a grandfather, a godfather, a friend, a colleague and so on. When it comes to Aboriginal women's experience, the very map of it is different, as it leads to too many routes of oppression. Indigenous feminists like Rebecca Walker do not concentrate too much into analyzing scores of differences in Aboriginal women's experiences. She accommodates herself amidst certain strategies of western feminism. She says, "To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life" (87).

When talking about differences explicated by indigenous feminism, Australian feminist critic, Iris Young says that it "is not based on fixed attributes but is an outcome of the relations between groups and their interactions with institutions" (Robinson 55). Phyllis Kaberry is the first white Australian woman anthropologist to represent Indigenous women. She argues that Aboriginal Women had "more autonomy and independence in their society" (Robinson 79). Kaberry's arguments are placed against

male anthropologist's view that indigenous women "are no more than domesticated cows" (qtd. Robinson 79).

Chilla Bellbeck is an Aboriginal feminist who calls for an inclusive view of feminism. According to her, "these connections point to the claim that many of us are hybrid subjects, neither purely 'westerner' nor purely 'easterner' but a mixture of both: we are in the other but she is also in us, a part of what constitutes our understandings of ourselves and the world" (6). She further acknowledges the fact that feminists celebrate the experiences and capacities of the female body, that is contrasted as "life against death, nurture against aggression, connectedness against individual self-absorption" (11). She also lauds the Gynocentric feminists for maintaining "an identity for women by virtue of a shared biological, psychological or social experience" (13). Myrna Cunningham also supports an inclusive version of feminism as she wants it to "expand its paradigm to include cultural and linguistic dimensions, including the spirituality and world-view of Indigenous women" (59).

Bell Hooks is a black feminist, who sees feminism as being fundamentally racist. But at the same time she believes that "it has something to offer Black women in America" (Robinson 50). Sara Suleri also finds it hard to take western feminism as it is. According to her,

The claim to authenticity – only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial sub continental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture – points to the great difficulty poisted by the 'authenticity' of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want. (1318)

Suleri is not able to claim authenticity in western feminism. That is the reason why she says that, "If realism is the Eurocentric and patriarchal pattern of adjudicating between disparate cultural and ethnic realities, then it is surely the task of radical feminism to provide an alternative perspective" (1321).

Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* is an important work added to the canon of Aboriginal Feminism. When talking about domestic violence and mistreatment of women, Maracle says, "How many times do you hear from our own brothers, "Indian Women don't whine and cry around, nag or complain. "At least not "real" or "true" Indian Women. Embodied in that kind of language is the negation of our femininity – the denial of our womanhood" (17). Maracle says that "the denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level" (17). When women are pushed to such a level, it openly means being subjugated to the level of being animals. If that be so, women as animals could only reproduce animals, male or female for that matter. So naturally men will also be reduced to a sub-human level. This is what Maracle points to as "Animals beget Animals" (17).

According to Maracle, the hierarchy in the patriarchal world is also determined by the dictates of racism. White men place white women below them and native men below

white women. The lowest strata beneath them all are given to native women. Maracle bemoans the fact that native females are not referred to as ordinary women. She also observes that when White women invite them to speak it is only when the issue is about racism or about native people. According to Maracle, what is expected is that, “we are there to teach, to sensitize them or to serve them in some way. We are expected to retain our position well below them, as their servants. We are not, as a matter of course, invited as an integral part of “their movement” the women’s movement” (18). This is something that makes Maracle declare that, she is “not interested in gaining entry to the doors of the ‘White Women’s movement’” (18).

Maracle as a woman has experienced patriarchy and racism at all levels of her life. At one incident at school, Maracle says, “I was accused of sluttish behaviour by a moralizing principal whose assessment of me was guided by the colour of my skin rather than my character” (67). Maracle accepts that they are a “part of a global movement of women in the work, struggling for emancipation” (137). But at the same time she asks a vital question, “Do we really wants to be a part of a movement that sees the majority as the periphery and the minority as the centre?” (138).

So thus indigenous feminism play a role as useful lenses through which myriad issues of indigenous women can be examined. At the same time it is very obvious that a western-centric political vision of feminism is not accepted by indigenous feminists. Aileen Moreton Robinson an Australian Aboriginal feminist critic, exposes the biased feministic analysis of western feminism. She says that Indigenous and non-indigenous women live with different experiences of racism, race privilege and sexism. According to her, the crossing out of race denies other women’s experience. She points out the fact that “it is the white female body that is centered in the analysis” (41).

When the centre of narration is a white female experience, then naturally the experiences of the indigenous women relegate to the background. In the process of explaining this white centeredness, Robinson says: “White women participated in gendered racial oppression by deploying the subject position middle-class white woman both unconsciously and consciously, informed by an ideology of true white womanhood, which positioned Indigenous women as less feminine, less human and less spiritual than themselves” (24).

When analysing the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous women, Robinson finds that “distance, unease, racial superiority and often cruelty pervade these relations” (28) and white women involve in acts of humiliation and cruelty. Robinson further notes that: “The invisibility of white race privilege and racial and class oppression is an outcome of giving primacy to gender oppression and sex difference. Belonging to a privileged group means that liberal feminists can centre themselves as the subject of their theory while excluding other women” (36).

The kind of analyses found in most western feminism “mask the importance of the way in which race and cultural difference shape family structures, sexuality and class” (Robinson 37). Race is a subject that is not consciously discussed in their work and

if it is discussed then it is done unconsciously says Robinson. So though “‘Race’ is integral to the analysis, but made invisible” (Robinson 38). As a result it is very obvious that “White women’s problems are centred and normalized” (Robinson 38). Analyzing the pages of western feminists one by one, Robinson comes to a conclusion that,

None of the authors illuminates the different impact of change on different groups of women, because the focus of their studies is the gender and class oppression of white women. They reduce the nature of oppression to whether or not white women’s unpaid or paid work is valued within capitalist patriarchal societies. Class and gender are visible in these accounts, while race as whiteness and “other” remains invisible. (Robinson 39)

Whatever be the differences, feminism in general examines the role and importance of women in society and advocates for women’s rights and opportunities. Like other criticism, Feminist criticism also aims at changing the world for the better. Feminism is a discourse that is there to unravel the oppression of women, analyse it and take it forward towards providing alternate solutions to it. ‘Feminism’ does not have a static definition. Not all feminists explicate the same idea. Everyone differs on certain grounds. Feminism against men is a stereotypical description and not a suitable one. Though this is deeply ingrained, it is a wrong notion. All kinds of women have “suffered oppression, fortune, imprisonment, enslavement and rape through history” (Robbins 7). Some women who call themselves as hardcore feminists argue that if women can do everything just as men, then all is well. But this is not the version of a liveable reality. If it is conceptualised thus in the name of equality of sexes, then the relationship between men and women will become something like a battlefield beyond redemption. The unique identity of a woman will also be lost. Advocating a complimentary gender role proves to be important to the contemporary world.

It is also important that western feminism has to “notice the structures of oppression that afflict women who occupy positions of multiple marginality by virtue, for example, of class and gender, race and gender, sexuality and gender, or any combination of these facets” (Robbins 28). McRobbie also puts forth the same idea that in order to have proper relevance to women outside the discourse, it is necessary to “learn what they are thinking about and how they experience a patriarchal and sexist society” (128).

An inclusive aspect of feminism that includes all kinds of theoretical narratives and thoughts proves to be a more accepted form of feminism to Indigenous women. Aboriginal feminism does not reject culture, tradition and the personal and political relationship with men. Aboriginal women adopt different strategies to counter marginalization and constructive inferiorisation. They valorise their cultural differences and their roles as mothers and caretakers of their nations. They also recognize the need for education and respectable jobs and roles in the society at large. Some Aboriginal women interpret in a wrong way the call for equality, as women asking for rights to be like men. It is a wrong notion that could keep them away from being empowered.

The Aboriginal women claim for their cultural traditions and self-government to be restored and for their once respected status to be restored. They do not realise that this is an utopian task to undertake. What has been learnt by their men in a long process is difficult to vanish into thin air so easily, even if such a piece of history is re-established. The multi-culturalistic nature of the contemporary world also does not entertain such a re-establishment.

Aboriginal women have not so far enjoyed automatic inclusion or leadership roles in public life. They are not equally treated in Aboriginal governance. They continue to face discrimination. Aboriginal resistance to feminism actually deconstructs certain notions of feminism and it moves towards an inclusive reconstruction of the same. According to Makere Stewark- Harawira “an inclusive feminism is one that not only recognizes difference but seeks to disrupt the privileging impact of the unequal structures of power” (128). He also gives a call to Aboriginal women to re-weave the fabric of feminism “into a new spiritually grounded and feminine-oriented political framework and process of ‘being together in the world’” (136).

Henning also asserts that “models and theories of feminism generally have flexibility within them, but we must continue to unpack implicit biases and open new ways of approaching how we analyze gendered cultural constructs” (196). He calls this as a decolonizing process towards recreating “an ‘oppressionless’ world view” (196). After adding all these points of analysis, finally Henning says “in bringing this back to myself as a scholar, as a woman, as a mother and as Cherokee, I cannot assert that I am a feminist” (196). In the process of analyzing feminism in general, Denis claims: “I am both a part of western thinking and practices, as well as separate from them” (42). This is one way of making themselves available for an inclusive idea of feminism. In an attempt to define Indigenous feminism, Tina Beads says:

You recognize that there is an inequality between men and women and you recognize that that is compounded by race and that you’re actually looking at race, gender and class in your work. You’re incorporating all three of those things, and you’re using that as a backdrop to the work you do when you look at policies or media or job descriptions or anything. And, you figure out why isn’t this working for an Aboriginal woman. When you can sort of apply your thinking that way then I think that you can probably call yourself as Aboriginal feminist. (232)

When talking about the importance of feminism, LaRocque tells her fellow Aboriginal feminists that, “freedom from imperial, systemic and personal dominations must remain the basis of our emancipator efforts” (68). In order to have a larger scope, feminism has to bridge with other movements working towards social justice. Overall feminism should downplay all kinds of oppressive traditions and uphold non-oppressive traditions. No one can refuse the existence of women on earth. Heaping violence on them heartlessly and without even a pinch of mercy, suggests that their presence is not desired. It in turn suggests that the world will not move ahead if they are not around. In the same way as Colleen Glenn says, “anybody who thinks that removing women from the

community is going to give you a stronger society has got something missing somewhere. It just doesn't work that way" (240).

Shirley Green calls women as "creatures of context: our identities are formed in the context of history, family, community, gender, culture and so on" (160). But in all such contexts, women have been made to bestow themselves "with feminine charms of frailty" (Kaur 227). Feminists raised their voices in aggression against it, but it's high time to realize that individualism and distinct identity is more important than others. Feminism questions various structures of the society that suppress women and it is not the man who is always questioned. Everything that controls and dominates is also questioned.

Thus the analysis of the texts amidst the feministic discourse proves that an inclusive form of feminism is that what appeals to indigenous women. Indigenous women give importance to their traditional roles. They consider their ability to be mothers and produce their people as giving them respect and dignity. They beautifully celebrate their difference as a woman. In recognising the importance of traditional roles, they do not ignore empowering concepts like education, job, leadership and political roles. Ultimately, their aim is to achieve a complimentary status that gives support to shoulder and share responsibilities with men, and not for an equal footing with men.

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