



Decolonizing Feminism: Navigating Gender Dynamics in the Post-Colonial Era

Mriganka Das¹ & Dr. Shantanu Siuli²

1. Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, Kolkata, W.B., India
2. Assistant Professor & Ph.D Supervisor, Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, Kolkata, W.B., India

Abstract:

The present study has been undertaken to discuss the Characteristics of Postcolonial Feminism. It also highlights the Colonization and Subjugation of Women. The term post-colonialism earlier referred exclusively to the writings (discourses) and practices produced by the history of colonization with its new symbolism. It is now more of an abstraction figuratively applied to any strategic redefinition of marginality. Postcolonial feminism is critical of the fact that the Western constructions of indigenous women do not reflect the real cultural situations of these women. Postcolonial feminist theorists have accused postcolonial theorists not only of obliterating the role of women in the struggle for independence but also of misrepresenting them in nationalist discourses. The present study is descriptive and based on secondary sources of information like books, journals, etc. To conclude we can say that the theory of postcolonial feminism is clear evidence of the fact that there exist feminisms indigenous to the third world countries. The concerns and analyses of third-world feminists are rooted in and responsive to the problems women face within their national contexts.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Cultural Perspectives, Colonial Oppression, Feminist Movements, and Colonial Legacy.

Introduction:

Postcolonial feminists find parallels between colonialism and the subjugation of women. The western feminists had a narrow focus on the general belief that all women should be equal to men and emphasized the sameness and solidarity of women, irrespective of their manifold cultural, social, and economic differences. They did not examine the nuances and ambiguities of different cultures. Imperial colonization was associated with the belief that westerners were superior and the colonized were inferior races and, therefore, had to be civilized. Postcolonial feminists object to the idea of the commonality and universality of women's lives, since these were generally based on the universalization of western women's experiences, and wanted their own voices to be heard. Through the lens of colonialism, they were able to explore a lot of issues relating to subordination, such as migration, slavery, representation, suppression and resistance, rather than treating gender in a simplistic sense.

They believe that gender cannot be extricated from other aspects of their identity and also one cannot gloss over the differences between the western and third world countries. Postcolonial feminism has thus opened up areas and topics for academic studies and research that provide a more nuanced picture of women's lives from around the world (Hooks, 1984).

Both feminism and postcolonialism are concerned with the question of marginality. The colonized native in postcolonial theory and the woman in feminist theory are both marginalized figures. As such both theories, which have developed separately, share some formal patterns. If the woman in feminist theory is replaced by the colonized native in postcolonial theory, the discourse would still retain its form. Both feminism and postcolonialism are oppositional discourses: they have an enemy; they display a tone of anger and an acute sense of historical wrong; and they demand a new historiography. But whereas feminism made its appearance in the humanities and the social sciences after the second wave feminism, the relationship between feminism and postcolonialism (which became an academic subject in the nineties) exposed many blind spots in the two perspectives. Feminism looked at through postcolonial lens appeared divided and vulnerable to criticism. Similarly feminism points to many gaps in postcolonial theory. The history of the freedom struggle in India seen through a feminist viewpoint, for example, would appear a little different (McLeod, 2007).

Objectives of the Study: The present study has been undertaken to discuss the Characteristics of Postcolonial Feminism. It also highlights the Colonization and Subjugation of Women. The term post-colonialism earlier referred exclusively to the writings (discourses) and practices produced by the history of colonization with its new symbolism.

Significance of the Study: On a global discursive and economic stage, postcolonial feminist studies is obliged to develop strategies that address contexts which are both local and global, theoretical and practical, while remaining in dialogue both with the first world and the rest. In this regard the present study is significant enough.

Characteristics of Postcolonial Feminism:

Indigenous Cultural Criticism: The cultural criticism generated by postcolonial feminism is leveled against the first and second wave feminisms which are entirely western in conception, origin, and development. Postcolonial feminism is critical of the fact that the western constructions of indigenous women do not reflect the real cultural situations of these women. According to postcolonial feminists like Chandra Mohanty, mainstream western feminism represents the other women as 'a composite, singular, third world woman'. Mohanty, an Indian feminist, reveals that this perception reflects an arbitrary construction. Western feminism homogenizes and systematizes the oppression of women without situating them in their culture, ideology and socioeconomic conditions which are different for different groups. Third world feminists raise serious objections to the consideration of women as "already constituted and coherent groups with identical interests and desires regardless of class, ethnic or radical Location. The notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy cannot be applied universally and cross culturally" (Mohanty, 1988, p.52)

The exclusion and marginalization of women within national cultures is true of many countries which gained independence in the twentieth century. Exclusions based on race, gender and class may be culturally inherent. Women's struggle for equality still continues even after liberation and thus reaffirms the need for, and relevance of, the discourse of postcoloniality.

Parallelism and Intersection:

Postcolonial and feminist theories are parallel and convergent, and they intersect each other. Through symbolism of women and their sharing of oppression and repression with colonized races and culture as colonized western feminist theory and postcolonial theory run parallel to each other. Both feminist discourse

and post-colonial theory have long been thought of as associative and even complementary. Both discourses are predominantly political and concern themselves with the struggle against oppression and injustice. Moreover, both reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, which is dominated by the hegemonic white male, and vehemently deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. Imperialism, like patriarchy, is after all a phallogocentric, supremacist ideology that subjugates and dominates its subjects. The oppressed woman is in this sense akin to the colonized subject. Essentially, exponents of post-colonialism are reacting against colonialism in the political and economic sense while feminist theorists are rejecting colonialism of a sexual nature (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/keyconcepts/feminism-and-postcolonialism.htm>)

From Margin to Centre: Postcolonial theory highlights the continued dominance of western ways of knowing. Like Gayatri Spivak, Joanne Sharp (2008) also argues that while western ways of knowing are accepted as the single voice of authenticity, other forms of knowing are marginalized by western thinkers since these are often relegated as myth or folklore. Postcolonial theorists have challenged western ways of knowing and writing, and this “single voiced authority” (Kalpana, 2003).

Double Colonization of Women: The most significant issue of postcolonial writings is the status of women in third world countries and cultures. The term ‘Double Colonization’ introduced by Holst-Peterson and Rutherford (1988) has become a durable description of the two forms of dominance, patriarchy and imperialism and of women’s status. Both forms of dominance, patriarchy and imperialism, are comparable and overlapping. Postcolonial feminist writings examine the role of white women in empire at the level of symbolism and also at the level of their functioning. Double colonization refers to women of colonized nations being doubly oppressed due to their race as well as their gender. It analyzes the concerns of women as members of marginalized groups within postcolonial societies, the case of indigenous minorities, and as women with a history of unbroken oppression.

Status of Women in the Post Colonial Era: The post colonial women were given more importance. The constitution that was drafted after independence made many provisions for the safety of women and for their betterment, through education, reservations and equality. Women too began to strive hard and excelled in all fields that were once dominated by men. We have seen remarkable leadership of women as politicians, as entrepreneurs, as astronauts, as sportspersons who bring glory to the nation. The prominent line of difference between man and women began to become thin till the beginning of modern times that saw women getting greatly influenced to the western culture and fashion. They failed to strike a balance between the Indian and the Western cultures. They got carried away with their education and modern lifestyle and made themselves vulnerable to the men who considered women as objects of pleasure. Rape, sexual harassment, molestation, eve-teasing, forced prostitution, etc are a common affair today. The crime graph against women is increasing at an alarming rate today. The condition of an Indian widow is quite deplorable. At home, the woman’s contribution towards home as a housewife is not recognized.

Feminist Movements in Europe: While the women of continental Europe were momentarily reduced to silence, new feminist initiatives emerged from the 1850s in England and Scandinavia, in connection with debates surrounding legal reforms in the fields of matrimony, education, and women’s employment. English feminists mobilized against the legal subjection of wives in marriage (dispossession of their personal property in favour of their husbands, highly unequal handling of adultery, virtual impossibility of divorce). With the support of Members of Parliament such as Lord Henry Brougham (1778-1868), they succeeded in passing a law that facilitated divorce (Matrimonial Causes Act, 1857), but married women were still dispossessed of their own property. In Scandinavian countries, the legal submission of women, authority of fathers over daughters, and status of single adult women were called into question and became the subject of reform in the 1850s.

During the ensuing decade, feminist movements formed in Western and Central Europe. In France, the first feminist associations were created at the initiative of the journalist André Léo (masculine pseudonym of Léodile Champseix, 1824-1900). In the German states, Louise Otto-Peters (1819-1895) and Auguste Schmidt (1833-1902) created the General German Women's Association in 1865, in the presence of the socialist leader August Bebel (1840-1913). Feminist associations were also born in Bohemia, Bulgaria, the Ukraine and Moldavia. During the 1870s and 1880s, this first feminist wave extended to Eastern and Southern Europe. However, in Russia, Poland, Hungary and Spain, one can hardly speak of a feminist movement before 1900. In Russia, the All-Russian Union for Women's Equality was created in 1905 in the wake of the revolution, although its calls for female suffrage were not taken up by the revolutionary movement.

Focusing on women's rights, these feminist movements pursued objectives that revolved around two central questions: reforming the education of young girls and marriage. Other demands were added on to these, such as reforming sexual morals, gender equality before the law, and women's access to universities and qualified occupations. During the decade preceding the Great War, women's right to vote became a dominant demand in Europe. Moderate and more radical branches were in confrontation on all these questions, each with its own corresponding modes of action and arguments. The vast majority of feminists were legalists, preferably making recourse to petitions or the press, and seeking to obtain the support of politicians for their causes. Only a minority, such as British suffragettes, resorted to violence in order to be heard, for instance when Emily Davison (1872-1913) threw herself beneath the king's horses during the Epsom derby in June 1913. She died four days later as a result of her wounds. Beyond these differences, the period between 1890 and 1910 marked a high point for first wave feminism in Europe.

Nature, Dynamics and the Women's Movement in India:

The genesis of the new women's liberation movement lay in the radicalization of Indian politics in the late sixties. The rebellious mood of the youth, poor peasants, marginal farmers, educated dalit and tribal men and women, industrial working classes found its expression in the formation of innumerable special interest groups addressing themselves to the needs and demands of the local masses. Macro political processes were also finding major shifts in their rhetoric as the protest movements of the subaltern masses had taken militant paths guided by different political ideologies. The official communist parties faced major political challenge in the form of the Naxalbari movement in Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab.

Middle class mass upheaval in Gujarat (popularly known as Navnirman movement) against corruption, price rise, unemployment, speculation, hoarding and black-marketing in 1974 was replicated in Bihar in the name of Sampoorna Kranti Movement under the leadership of a Gandhian leader, Jay Prakash Narayan. The unprecedented strike of the railway workers gave proof of the political power of collective strength of the working class. Tribal people's struggles against destructive development which served the interests of the kulaks, moneylenders, contractors, bootleggers and indigenous industrialists thriving on the barbaric means of surplus extraction developed in Chhattisgarh, Singhbhum, Bhojpur, Srikakulam, Chandrapur, Dhulia and in the pockets of the North Eastern states. The tribal masses in Dhule region of Maharashtra demanded the Employment Guarantee Scheme in response to the 1974 drought paralysing normal agricultural activities. This historic demand revolutionised the thinking of the development workers about responsibility of the state at the time of economic crisis (Patel 1985).

In Maharashtra, women activists and women intellectuals involved in progressive movements took initiatives in forming a united front called Anti-price rise Women's Committee and organised direct action against the culprits who created man-made scarcity of essential goods. Thousands of poor and lower middle class women joined the struggle under the leadership of seasoned and able women from the left and socialist background. Mrinal Gore, Ahalya Ranganekar, Manju Gandhi and Tara Reddy made their special mark in the eyes of the masses as a result of their unique ability to reach out to women of different class

backgrounds. Their intellectual self-sufficiency, ability to relate micro issues to macro political reality, simple lifestyle and non-bossy nature provided role models to the younger generation of women's liberation activists of all political hues. Around the same time, a conference of Women's Liberation Movement Coordination Committee was organised in Pune. This had an even larger socio-political and cultural base as right from young educated women, professionals, writers, teachers, industrial working class women, women workers from the unorganised sector, temple prostitutes and tribal women participated in the deliberations and highlighted their demands.

Between 1977 and 1979, new women's groups emerged in the cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Patna, and Madras. They organised protest actions against dowry murders, beauty contests, sexist portrayal of women in media, pornographic films and literature imported from abroad, introduction of virginity tests by the U.K. immigration authorities, custodial rape and pitiable condition of women in prison. These groups were multicultural in their composition and worldview. As a result, their political agenda reflected the contemporaneous handling of the complex reality of women constructed by interplay of class, caste, religion, ethnicity and globalisation (Melkote and Tharu, 1980). The spokespersons of these groups had an advantage of high levels of ideological investment and the experience of the radical movements of the late sixties. Their collective wisdom provided the main backbone to the movement. Their newsletters, magazines and booklets in regional languages as well as in English provided a creative way of handling Indian women's problems. The launch of *Manushi* in January 1979 was a qualitative leap in this direction. The need to study women's issues in academic institutions and to conduct research based on experiential material and affirmative action was beginning to be discussed among Indian women's studies scholars by the early eighties. Further, the discourse on this subject proved to be a fruitful exercise for activists, academics, researchers, policy planners and the United Nations system. The apex body of higher learning, University Grants Commission defined women's studies (WS) as a discipline that involved research, documentation, teaching, training and action. It is understood that women have subordinate status in our society so the knowledge base created by 'women's studies' should be used for the empowerment of women (Patel, 2009).

Conclusion:

The women's movement highlighted the marginalisation of women from the economy. The efforts of women activists were directed in agitation and propaganda for women's rights, street-fighting against escalating violence against assertive women and team building to counter sexual harassment at the work place. Women's movement and the state have had areas of both collaboration and conflict. Regarding legal reforms, gender budgeting and providing institutional support to women survivors of violence, the women's movement has worked with the state (specifically the criminal justice system). Women's movement has also fought with the state with regards to discriminatory family laws and state terror is unleashed on people's movements-struggles for safe environment, water, atrocities against minorities, displacement of masses for mega projects.

Citation: Das. M. & Siuli. Dr. S., (2024) "Decolonizing Feminism: Navigating Gender Dynamics in the Post-Colonial Era", *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-2, Issue-9, October-2024.