DIFFICULTY IN DEFINING *'THE FEMININE'*

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ABSTRACT

Women thinkers from Virginia Woolf to Helene Cixious have expressed difficulty in defining the feminine. Most feminists use 'feminine' and 'masculine' to represent social constructs and 'female' and 'male' to denote biological aspects of sexual differences. In this usage, 'feminine' represents nurture and 'female' nature.

INTRODUCTION

A patriarchal dispensation imposes certain social standards of feminity on all biological women to foster the belief that the accommodating postures enjoined are natural. To be bold, assertive, independent, and intellectual is to be non-conforming and therefore unfeminine and unnatural. In the traditional, patriarchal view, the terms 'feminine' and 'female' are interchangeable but to the feminist, women are female but they need not necessarily be feminine, in the traditional sense. Feminism views 'feminity as a creation born out of patterns of sexuality and behavior imposed by cultural and social norms. Hence Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that one is not born a woman but becomes one and Julia Kristeva's contention that "woman as such does not exist".

By an elementary classification human qualities are divided into two classes corresponding to the division between male and female. In a patriarchal world-view, it is generally assumed that a number of psychological traits are linked to sex. Independence, rationality and aggression are deemed to be male attributes while dependency, irrationality and submissiveness are female attributes. There is a stereotype of feminity in society that encompasses all the aspects of life from everyday conduct to education, employment, public life, art and literature. This stereotype of feminity also sets up norms for the girl child which influences her life plan and is instrumental in shaping her character.

'Feminists' counter claim is that when woman is totally excluded from 'civilization or the power and the rewards of community life, she will seek inclusion by the only means at her disposal: by the cunning use of her sexual attraction for men and by intrigue. Thus woman is hostile to the demands of civilization when civilization is totally masculine. All through

western history, man has been represented as reason, woman as unreason. If man is more spiritual, intellectual, morally good, woman is more physical, animal and sensual. Therefore, woman must be controlled and through this control man could hope to control the animal side of his own nature. Freud, the complete patriarch, accused woman of an inability to remove her instinctual demands in the interests of civilization.

If this is the role of society, religion, too, has colluded in the marginalization of women. As Figes argues:

Religion is not only a way in which the male projects a vision of the world as he would wish it to be and expresses his attitude with regard to himself in relation to others and the universe at large, a voice he uses in order to lay down the moral law.(49)

Manu instructs men to make women dependant on them. Women are describing as easily corrupted and need to be kept occupied. Their sexual instincts are uncontrollable and they are promiscuous by nature. The Judaea- Christian view of women finds a close parallel in the traditional Hindu concept of women. They are unfit to be given access to the performance of Vedic rituals. It is also affirmed that god has assigned duties of subservience and devotion to women and those who live by these norms are 'good' women. Transgressors are, by implication, 'bad' women. Hindu mythology and socio-cultural traditions are replete with images of feudal gender-ownership. Sita and Savitri remain role models of the perfect Indian woman. If Draupadi's story exemplifies the image of 'woman-as-commodity'. Yashodara's is the final word in self-obliteration and sacrifice. This message that comes across is loud and clear: a total surrender of woman's existence.

A philosophical view expressed by Otto Weininger credits woman with a single purpose and interest in life: sexuality. He sees her as being devoid of moral standards, lacking in individuality and an independent will. Havelock Ellis, taking a biological view, thinks the biological passivity of women is greatly reinforced by social conventions, and repression has increased such traits of receptivity, submissiveness and modesty. Freud's psycho-analysis bases feminity on a negation, a lack, and attributes a number of psychological traits to a woman's constitutional disposition: modesty; vanity, inclination to envy and jealousy, lack of social conscience or social justice, a weaker moral sense, a limited urge and masochistic tendencies. To Alfred Adler, 'feminity' is symbol for all those traits which in our culture obstruct social success: weakness, timidity, shyness, passivity, submissiveness and sense of being marginalized.

They are more severe moralists, more ready to admit weaknesses in themselves and less self asserting. Mathers and Mattilde Averting, taking a historical approach, maintain that feminity as such does not exist. Traits traditionally associated with feminity are not linked to sex but to the subordinate social position of women and can be found in members of the other sex in the

history of other races. Psychometric tests conducted by Terman and Miles have yielded the conclusion that feminity is marked by interest in domestic affairs and aesthetic objects and occupations. Women, they opine, are more compassionate and sympathetic than men. They are more emotional and expressive of their emotions.

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, too, believes the association of psychological traits with sex to be accidental rather than based on constitutional facts. She points out that passivity, responsiveness, fondness for children, timidity, coquetry and emotional dependence are in some societies found in both men and women but are absent in both males and females in other cultures. From these diverse views, one tends to agree with klien that there did exist a concept of feminity which was considered to be the embodiment of certain distinctive psychological traits. Early notions of feminity were chiefly supported by metaphysical and religious arguments and denied women a soul. Aristotle called feminity a "kind of natural defectiveness" in his Degeneration Animalium. Woman was considered a sort of under-developed human being, with only the external attributes of a human being, but lacking the essential human qualities of individuality, intellectual capacity or character.

The woman must tend to the hearth. She must be educated and trained for the pleasure of men. Rousseau's prescription for women was endorsed by others. Napoleon's code enjoined a woman to obey her husband, allowed a father sole authority over his children and banned a woman from taking resources to the law without her husband's consent. Rousseau's romantic view of woman allowed him to idealize as well as subordinate her, and to regard her as intellectually inferior but morally superior. Significantly, his notions of sex roles and the relationship between the sexes fostered narcissism and prompted masochism, both female personality traits treated at length by psychologists in later times.

Freud viewed civilization as an all-male achievement and looked upon woman as a hindrance to man in his work. He emphasized the superego; a conscious restraint of the libido in the interests of civilization. He was a bourgeois who did not see beyond his social situation. Freud and his psychoanalysis emerged at a time when the economic and social dependency of women was being seriously challenged. It played a major role in perpetuating a male oriented society by raising a psychological taboo just as the old controls were breaking down.

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father and the patriarchal pattern of society were basic to human nature and not socially constructed. The idea of role play was very strong in Freud's work.

A woman who chooses to be independent must repudiate her 'feminity' which can be realized only if she renounces her claims as an autonomous subject. But her sexuality is an essential part of her humanity. This is the conflict that marks the situation of the emancipated woman, according to deBeauvoir. Maternity, believes de Beauvoir, is one feminine function that cannot be performed in complete liberty. A woman must make the choice between the shackles of marriage or loss of social responsibility. Motherhood also paralyzes a woman's activity.

French theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Monique Wilting and others base their criticism upon Derrida's theory of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis. They allege that the structure of language is phallocentric and that it has been used as an instrument in the subjugation of women. They question the traditional concept of man as the originator of thought and meaning. Rejecting existing language and literature as patriarchal, they seek to create a feminine language. Together, the concern of the Anglo-American and the French theorists has been to expose the patriarchal ideology implicit in language and literature and to establish canon of works by women to bring them into mainstream literature.

When it comes to India, Indian sociologists, too, express similar opinions. Suma Chitnis points out that historical circumstances and values render the woman's situation different in India gained equal status legally with the drawing up of the constitution, while in the west women had to wage a long war. Socially, in India, the institution of marriage and family is still considered necessary because of the security and social status it gives to both men and women, making it difficult and traumatic to break away. So Indian feminists raise their voices against social injustice and oppression of woman rather than ask for their freedom from the institution of marriage and family.

A contemporary scholar opines that it must have been after the great millennia of ancient India civilization that several sociological and political developments, like foreign invasions, resulted in a patriarchal order taking root in India. To corroborate the theory, the two fold image of Purusha-Prakriti of the Sankhya and the post Sankhya systems of ancient Indian-philosophy is cited.

Further a position of intellectual respect and honour enjoyed by ancient woman like Gargi and Maithreyi, the status of woman degenerated to that of a domestic slave, abused and exploited at every stage in her life and suffering all the distortions mentions by Mary Woolstonecraft as a result of being confined to domestic life. Denied education and property rights, women became helpless victims of male manipulation. They were forced to suffer in

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silence the agony of social ostracism as rejected or widowed women and the humiliation and humanity heaped upon them by practices such as dowry and sati.

Manu, the post-Vedic codifier of Hindu shastras and his dismissal of women as "abalas" who do not deserve independence is largely true of the outlook of Indian society even today. Critics like Nabar hold a pernicious cultural legacy responsible for the subservient position of the Indian woman, by idealizing impossibly self-denying women like Sita and Savitri, it sublimates oppression of women and the total surrender of her existence of the male, "There is a fundamental parity between our perpetuation of mythical stereotypes like Sita and Draupadi and our present day reluctance to admit any change that threatens the andocentric, patriarchal set-up"

The fiction of western women writers such as Margaret Atwood, Anna Wilson, Fay Weldon, May Sarton and others is dominated by themes such as woman identified relationships, single motherhood, lesbian continuum, relations between mothers and daughters, sexual politics, patriarchal relations and the interlocking structures of gender, class and race. Themes such as single motherhood or lesbian continuum do not find space in Indian fiction because the Indian socio-cultural structure does not accommodate such ideas easily. Thus, while the basic underlying principles of feminism in the west and the East are largely similar in that both aim at bettering the lot of women, the different historical and social contexts necessitates a socio-culture specific approach to women's fiction in India.

During the decades that led to independence Indian society as well as literature was deeply influenced by individuals such as Gandhi and social movements such as the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj. Gender discrimination almost disappeared as men and women were united in pursuit of the common goal of independence. But after the objective was achieved, the sexual divide became apparent again as old taboos and prejudices returned with renewed vigour.

R.K.narayan's women characters are, for the most part, conventional and meek. The exceptions are Rosie in The Guide and the Daisy in The painter of signs. Krishnaswamy comments aptly that most of Narayan's "girls, beloveds, wives, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers amply illustrate the passive feminine….Theirs is the badge of sufferance, of endurance, of acceptance---- therefore, they survive". The active feminine is represented by Rosie and Daisy. Rosie, after leaving her husband and then her lover, takes over the management of her life and her household and emerges as a dedicated dancer needing no male prop to sustain her.

Nayantara Sahgal's novels present the impact of cultural upheaval upon man-woman relationship and the institution of marriage. Independent minded women suffer fractured relationships in a society that sets double standards for men and women. Her women

characters rebel and opt for an unrestrained moral code. Sahgal's novels, in effect, register the protest of her women protagonists. Anita Desai enjoys a special place in Indian English fiction as the first writer introduces to this genre the element of psychological realism.

There is a need to connect 'the buried' and the desired by coming to terms with the unknown, the repressed and the feared because they are outside the symbolic. Although the feminist framework employed to analyze the works are conceptually western, it has been substantially adapted to the Indian socio-cultural milieu. This modern attempt to use the Indian socio-cultural specific feminist approach to analyze the literary discourse of the hidden ideology that woman in Indian society and to examine the working of her inner world.

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