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# [De] Constructing the Feminine : Addressing the Postmodern Feminist Syndrome

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## INTRODUCTION

The radicalism and stridence that characterizes postmodern feminism is potent enough to allure many. Postmodern feminists have been pretty successful in establishing a few primary facts that ultimately culminate into a singular mother reality stating that gender is nothing but a matter of social construction. Their grievances against both masculinity and feminity compel them carve out slogans against the phallogentric and patriarchal hierarchies that constitute the 'Symbolic Order' for the entire human race as mentioned by Kristen Cambell (2004). They are therefore at daggers drawn with the old thought, old language and finally the old 'Woman'. This is for all these, to them, are the products and by-products of an androcentric male order which reigns absolute and supreme. With the polemics of killing this old woman their corollary is the promotion of a 'New' one---a Woman who is emancipated sexually, linguistically, economically, psychologically, culturally, politically and yet there is a long list of many such 'cullies' that somehow promise the freedom that has ever been dreamed by the female race. As Kottiswari (2008) talks of Claudine Hermann's allegation of their being 'thieves of language' or 'female Prometheus's' is significant here since the language they employ to shed light on their own experiences is a product of an order which is quintessentially male-centered.

The Foucauldian dynamics of power and the rejection of universalization of experiences and values has actually led the postmodern feminists develop a disgust for the sisterhood of female experience around the world. We thereof have now two binaries: 'Woman' and 'Women'. Both of these stand foil to each other since they respectively project the individuation and collection of experience undergone by women belonging to varying geographical (and subsequently historical and cultural) situations in the world. This conviction today has become almost dogmatic with the result that there is yet another frenzy now bent upon uprooting the foundations of basic social and human values that constitute any phenomenon in our social and personal lives today. This primarily owes to Foucault's belief that all values are promoted for self-interest as they are not self-contained without an eternal reality to justify their existence and subsequent survival. The Foucauldian model of power sufficiently propagates his belief that power has no single point of convergence and it

rather diverges to scatter to be exercised everywhere. We thus have no single repository of power which can be taken as supreme or absolute. Nevertheless, with due respect to Foucauldian schemata of human survival at both micro and macro levels along with the same to that of his followers (the postmodern feminists), I dare say that one needs seriously sit and examine what actually happened as an aftermath to such a rigorous and unleashed decentralization of Reality and Values.

### **LOSS OF THE FEMININE**

Postmodern feminists actually gifted the entire female race with a sense of de-femininity. One critically needs to deflate certain bombasts and pretensions that characterize the critical and philosophical paradigm of postmodernism. The excesses offered by this theory need to be appropriated to the benefit of the kaleidoscopic world order. It is certainly hard to underpin postmodernism as a coherent or compact mode of belief and thinking, the reason being its diversity and an unleashed flexibility. Nevertheless, the positive openings and threads offered by this school of thought can be exploited to loose up and develop the already-existing theories, something which can be of substantial help in terms of the new theoretical syntheses. But unfortunately, it theorizes the liberation of women not only from men but from their own identity as women too. We all believe that every entity, material or non-material, possesses some essence which it essentially inherits. Eagleton (2008) believes that even if we posit our belief in Heidegger's hermeneutics of belief and Derrida's discredit of even the existence of meaning in any form, we still know that there is an arbitrary relation among varying objects that we human classify under one broad umbrella or label. So which group does a Woman fall into when she is ethically not permitted to be a 'Woman'? If her entire existence (at all varying social and personal levels) is a matter of mere politicization, what is that singular reality that can actually impart her a stable standing—a standing which can entitle her the privileges of a prosperous life and a sound identity of her own. Postmodernists, so far, have still been dreaming of such an individualist standing for women but it goes without saying that their effort has unfortunately turned itself on its own head---something that accounts for the familial crisis plaguing the entire West today.

If deconstructing the two genders is the agenda of the postmodern feminist paradigm, it calls for a real analysis if they have actually 'Deconstructed' it or it is the 'De- construction' that has been executed. Allowing all forms of deviant sexuality with a big 'No' to heterosexuality, these feminists have ironically annihilated the fact that everyone among us (whether male or female) biologically, psychologically and emotionally needs a mate, and to be honest more preferably one from the opposite sex. So how can the postmodernists claim loyalty to their agenda of unpoliticizing sex by terminating heterosexuality while they

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themselves are opening doors to yet a more rigorously political way of emotional biological fulfillment---something named 'Homosexuality'.

This animosity of postmodernists towards the identity of females as 'feminine' is ironically a challenge to their biological and natural survival as women. If a woman is not a 'Woman' or 'Feminine', what is she then? Is there any third or 'unpolitical' gender category she can proclaim? Or to be more realistic, she perhaps doesn't belong to any sex. To me, the new vistas opened up by the postmodernists are actually building up arenas for women where they are expected to begin the strife of re-locating their identity from the scratch. We actually need to be sure in terms of whether postmodern feminism really imparts radically new gender roles to the women or it even deprives them of the former, one which at least preserved for them a certain specified category of human existence i.e the Female.

Postmodern feminists reinforced the polemics of power struggle between man and woman by denying the institutions of heterosexual marriage, family, motherhood and child-bearing. In their strife to unpoliticize the binary of male and female, they have tended to develop Lesbian and Gayism---the two intensely political structures that were raised up as effective defense mechanisms against the conventional structures of heterosexuality.

#### **THE ORIENTAL 'OTHER'**

This is only the sexual and familial side of the issue however. There is yet another dimension that is invariably harming the quintessential identity of women as 'woman'. The Western feminists have managed to incur the cult of the 'Other' in their war against men. 'Other', as we all know, is a singular key term that denotes the marginalization women are subjected to as member of a patriarchal social order. Nevertheless, it is no less than an irony that the postmodern feminists (consciously or unconsciously) have developed yet another 'other' for themselves. This second 'other' belongs to their own race---the women of third world, under-developed and those belonging to Muslim countries. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) evaluates the writings on Third World women by some western feminist authors and inferred that they:

. . . colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world thereby producing/ re-presenting a composite, singular 'third world woman' - an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse . . . assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other, characterize a sizable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world.

I have no qualms in agreeing with the idea that the experiences of women inhabiting varying geographical territories of the world are never the same. Their lives are predominantly conditioned by a sense of hybridism and displacement. This is particularly true about the women hailing from the postcolonial regimes. In their strife to emphasize the 'difference' or 'differance' characterizing all the social structures constituting the society, they all bring into lime light the fact that the universalisation of the female experience is something that goes to the benefit of the male order. It is thereof necessary to preserve the individuality of their experience keeping in view the varying environments and social orders they belong to. Postmodernism's agenda of decanonizing the metanarratives and master codes should be utilized at this point. For the feminist critical position, patriarchy or male centricity is the primary metanarrative to be exploded. At a crude level, the struggle began in the latter half of nineteenth century with white women struggling for their political and social rights. In the course of its journey, the movement went through varying phases ultimately reaching a point where it had to take into account the feminine, feminist and female experience of all the white, black and brown women although it simultaneously appears to be posing a replica to the same metanarrative it struggles against. For the non-white women, the account of the feminine, feminist and female experience held up by the white women is no less than a metanarrative. If there is no truth (as proposed by the postmodernist stand point) and only representations, then the actuality of non-white woman (as the world knows her today) is in the control of the white feminist who is in a position to not only shape it up but theorize and canonize too. The gender identity attached to the female race is a matter of constant continuation and remains in flux. Taking support from Heidegger's philosophy of hermeneutics, we believe that history keeps on updating itself and is always exposed to fresh possibilities. Today's future is bound to be tomorrow's past. We never know what lies ahead for us in the moment to come. History is thereof dynamic as it keeps on accepting and accommodating the fresh possibilities. If this is the case, the history of the feminine, feminist and female has got serious gaps. The history of the experience and thought of woman needs to be revisited since the presently popular account of all that we call 'Feminism' is all about the codes produced by the white women. According to Kottiswari (2008) history (if it claims impartiality and flux) should be redefined in terms of the female stand point since it has no practical space for the lived experience of the non-white female. The re-visionist streams of postmodernism can be of fairly good help here. It should be made clear at this point that re-vision does not mean 'looking back' nor it is a mere matter of 'survival'. It rather alludes to the re-making of the past which entails a re-invention of a new tradition so much so that it proclaims creation and transcreation.

It is henceforth imperative to go back to the late nineteenth century or even before that in order to see and visit what actually had been there at the end of the so-called 'Orient'. One thus needs to take into account the kind of experience a Muslim woman had been through

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while she was an inhabitant of the 'Harem' in the medieval era. The Foucauldian politics of difference can be of significant utility at this point since the feminine or female experience of an Arab Muslim woman living a harem life is as 'womanly' as that of her white European counterpart struggling outside. Jane Austen's heroines too are taken as a stereotype or 'lady of the house' type of creatures whose experience is almost synonymous to that of an Arab Muslim woman, though the difference between the two is of socio-cultural and representational nature. So, the need is to revisit the history by incorporating both the historic narrative and politics of representation.

The postmodernists nevertheless, at times, appear to be interrogating the grand narratives in a way which paves way for an iconoclastic type of pluralism. This willfully opens doors to marginality and differences unwelcomed otherwise and hitherto. The claims pronounced by Jean Francois Lyotard against the totalizing structures of the master code facilitates and creates space for a novel kind of subjectivity and scope for having a 'room of one's own'. Kottiswari also refers to Alice Jardine in *Gynesis* who successfully establishes a link between the 'crises of legitimation' of the 'master narratives' and the feminist critical stance:

It is widely recognized that legitimating is part of that judicial domain which, historically, has determined the right to govern, the succession of kings, the link between father and son, the necessary paternal fiction, the ability to determine who is the father---in the patriarchal culture. The crises experienced by the major western narratives have not, therefore, been gender-neutral. They are crises in the narrative invented by men.

However, their obsession with this individuality of the female experience has actually led them develop a few misconceptions. This is particularly true of their perception about the lives and experiences of Muslim women monitored by the flawed retrogressive traditions of Islam. To illustrate, the observance of Hijab among Muslim women is a point of tragedy for the white feminists. It epitomizes the repressive male order under the surveillance of which the veiled Muslim woman is breathing. She is thus captivated to the 'heremic' life of a rigorously masculine and patriarchal order where she virtually enjoys no freedom to come up with the talents and capacities she inherits. Western feminist theory, when applied to the Arab or Muslim women, tries to exercise its liberal feminist politics instead of creating a scope to discover the varying shades of being a female. Marnia Lazerg holds the view that a new approach is needed which is tolerant enough to acknowledge the differences while recognizing the need to explore the lived experiences of women surviving in varying cultures. The lives of Third World women, to Lazerg, should be studied 'meaningful, coherent and understandable instead of being infused "by us" with doom and sorrow.

Similarly, the Marxist feminists talk about the financial independence of women in a milieu where they must be allowed to step out of the four walls of the house and exercise their potentials to the best of what they have. This could indeed be a plausible proposition for many a women from both West and East. Even the contemporary scholarship in Islam, which is believed to be androcentric in terms of the interpretation it gives out of the sacred texts, concedes to the fact that women can earn on their own while abiding by certain conditions. This is nevertheless a loop-sided view of the entire situation. We still have many women, from both West and East, who crave for financial stability and relaxation not by going out and working but enjoying what is brought to home by the males of the family. They prefer staying at home while availing themselves of all the benefits they can claim being the members of the 'weaker/soft' sex. So what about the inclusion and exclusion of the experience of such women? What place do modernists and their followers allocate them? Do these women have any place to claim in theory are they are simply a part of that horrid 'Other' that has been terrifying the feminists since decades.

Feminism, within the postmodernist frame of critical thinking, seems to be drifting away from the 'emancipation' agenda which feminism actually sets off with. One must bear in mind that social reconstruction is the primary drive and motif behind the feminist stand point, no matter whatever form it exists in. Seeking help from Lyotard's 'legitimation narrative' of the speculative mind, we come to determine that knowledge is self-containing and must be sought for its own sake. The feminist side of the proposition allows the development of consciousness among the female. It is by the virtue of this very consciousness that the women would be in a position to penetrate and go deep down the operations of the male power in a most contemplative and intellectual manner. However, it goes without saying that this could be achieved only if women have a commons stance to hold up against the patriarchal order. What they all need is a communal analysis if the self while targeting the deeply-rooted androcentric assumptions and ways of comprehension that rule the present-day world order.

Ruling out all the universality and essentiality of the 'female' and making her subservient to the dynamics of total 'difference' is an act of sheer injustice on the part of the postmodern feminists. We all agree that Foucauldian polemics of 'difference' substantially help the program of incorporating and including the lived experiences of the marginalized, speechless or the un-mentioned/ Feminism has to give up its Eurocentric tone and temperament if it desires to include those within its domain who have never been allowed any space to speak and thus heard. Feminism has to necessarily construct a universally essential female who sustains and inherits a certain difference from the male as both the subject and author of her own history. But the history she writes, should be impartial and welcoming towards the truth and experiences of those who remained unheard and excluded during its composition

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hitherto. The postmodernist agenda, in its operation and influence on feminism, appears to be scared of the idea of an 'impartial history'. Stuart (2003) holds the view that it hesitates to assume that both the self and knowledge can be parts of history and culture. While accepting the differences among the experiences of the women inhabiting various geographical territories of the world and belonging to cultures and histories of differing backgrounds, they seem to be accepting a position of partial knowledge. With the acceptance of this notion, feminism in fact manages to drift away from its motto of Enlightenment while entering and getting overwhelmed by the fuzzy and jelly-like domain of postmodernism. Accepting the cultural and historical difference of survival and lived experience among women all around the world is one thing, but making it an integral part of the female history is another issue. Postmodernist theory runs the defect that it theoretically opens doors to the experience of the non-white females around the world but never tends to travel back into their past with an end to trace out its threads of genesis and tie those up to the present of not merely their own but to the theoretical stance of their white counterparts too.

I, at this point, would specifically like to take up the illustration of the women in south Asia. The postcolonial regimes of states like India and Pakistan demonstrate a kind of picture with regards to the situation of the female which is altogether different from the one experienced by the white female in Europe and America. The instance is that of the centrality religion enjoys in sustaining the domestic colonization against women in these countries. 'Satti in India has been a matter of much debate among a number of postcolonial feminist writers. Similarly, if a woman manages to escape the annihilating ritual of Satti, she has to live a life of perpetual celibacy in the memory of the deceased husband. Same goes for the women in Pakistan, especially in Sindh and southern parts of Punjab, where they live their entire lives under the constant threat of 'Kari'. Being alleged of having an illegitimate relationship with a male of the hostile clan, the 'Punjayet' of the males of the village or clan decides whether she enjoys a right to live or not. This Punjayet comprises the 'supposedly' wise males of the clan who are believed to be all just and sagacious so much so that they can practically give a verdict over the life and death of a girl. Another case is that of marrying the girls with Holy Quran. This is an ages-long tradition rampant in Sindh where the feudal lord of the clan or village gives his daughter in marriage to Holy Quran. She lives her life as a spinster in celibacy while supposing that she is no longer vulnerable to psychological, emotional, bodily or sexual drives which are bound to take place after adolescence. The reason behind this marriage is either the absence of a male heir to the family heritage and property since marrying the daughter to someone means giving her due share in her property to her and losing a part of the feudal hierarchy. The male feudal master or the 'Wadera' thus wisely resolves the issue by punishing his daughter in a most horrid way. She is afterwards meant for the prayer mat and her marriage partner---the Holy Quran. Despite the fact that the entire thing is starkly in opposition to Islamic law and the spirit of Islam both as a code of

faith and that of life, the whole proposition is carried out in the name of religion. The female of the feudal's house is silenced through emotional lashing while making her believe that the whole thing is a part of the project of her 'divinization'. She is considered to be 'be sharam' or unbashed if she asks for a right of seeking her emotional and bodily fulfillment through the institution of marriage. Does this mute woman has any name in the annals of history of the feminist agenda which has been devised from the European or Euro- American quarters?

Challenging the universals of 'good' and 'bad', 'true' and 'false' or 'right' and 'wrong' means that postmodern feminism has to be holistic and all-encompassing. The non-white Arab Muslim woman is a female who follows all that has been written for her by her 'Lord'. But the story of Sheherzade and Shehryar in *The Arabian Nights* appears to be doing away with these accounts propounded by the white feminists at the point where the Arab Muslim wife of the king shows that she can win not only a life for herself but an entire structure of male psychological order which, at the outset, decides her destiny even to an extent of killing her. The western representation of the Arab Muslim woman is actually a certain master code and no more than a subjective and blind supposition. By this, I do not mean that she does not confront the wrath of the male or patriarchy, but her experience is entirely private and different from the one presented by her white counterpart in Europe. One hence needs to posit a fact at this point that if there is no ultimate truth and all we have is Representation, is the image of the Arab Muslim female a plausible one since she is undergoing an experience altogether different from the one attached to her. Furthermore, how can one build up a certain level of credibility of what has been canonized for her since Representation is a human activity which is exposed to the continuum of time and temporal which keep on refreshing itself on behalf of their exposition to cultural, historical and environmental happenings?

The agenda of 'differance' favorite with postmodern feminists should be actually employed for a more sacred purpose of exploring the reality and situation of non-white woman. Deconstructing the gendered identities in a postmodernist mode will certainly topple down the entire schemata of feminist domain which ironically materializes its existence on the foundation of this difference only. Taking the gender/sexual difference for granted implies an undermining of the very privilege proclaimed by feminism in general thus resulting in its own eradication. Postmodernism presents a stark opposition to the Enlightenment agenda and accommodating postmodernism manifests that feminism has disowned its slogan of 'enlightenment' thus giving up all the possibility of social and political action for betterment. An almost similar type of critique, as highlighted by Stuart (2003), has been proposed by Jane Flax who also paves way for a more conciliatory and pacifying version of feminism. Feminist theories, as she argues in *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, 'like other forms of postmodernism should encourage us to tolerate and interpret



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ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity as well as to expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these needs may be .

Judith Butler, in *Inside/ Cut*, presents an anti-essentialist version of feminism on the way to the lesbian perspective. The respective unifying 'essence' of the female and male races that establishes their individual 'femininity' or 'masculinity' is more a matter of history than nature. Heterosexuality is in fact a 'regulatory function' that serves the quintessential heterosexual binarism. We are forced to be either male or female, something that is further reinforced by our observance of the phenomenon of heterosexuality. This can be further extended to the Foucauldian postmodernist belief that gender is actually not a matter of establishing and exercising identity among human race but an issue of power struggle characterizing the discourse through ages.

If this is the case, it is again hard to assimilate that what type of emancipation feminism seeks when it sink more into anarchy of a different kind. What solution Butler seeks when she pushes the feminists to celebrate the dissolution of gender into 'convergences of gender identity and all manner of gender dissonance'? The hope of developing new and more intricate subject positions is presumably poised with even greater possibilities of the Subject-Object conflict that characterizes the wrath of Third World feminism where white woman as subject is passing value judgments over the experiences and lives of non-white woman as the Object or 'Other'.

Foucault and his followers raise voice in favor of a discourse of resistance when they have plenty to say about individual perception and experience of power at an individual plane. Nancy Harstock nevertheless shows the other side of the picture by pronouncing that Foucault's is 'a world where passivity and refusal present the only possible choices. Resistance rather than transformation dominates his thinking and consequently limits his politics'. Stuart (2003) also points out that postmodern feminism harbors the dream of multiple embodiment as mentioned by Susan Bordo when she, in *Feminism. Postmodernism*, talks about 'the dream of endless multiple embodiments, allowing one to dance from place to place and self to self'. This ideal of divergence carries the potential to spread these multiple genders everywhere. And indeed to be everywhere is actually being nowhere. Moreover, the idealized notion of multiplicity when applied to the males, drifts them to a situation where their identity dissolves into femininity since carrying 'multiplicity' means carrying femininity. This compels Tania Modleska exclaim that 'male power...works to efface female subjectivity by occupying the site of femininity'

To many, Haraway's model of cyborg appears to be perfect in establishing both the situatedness and multiplicity of the female subject both within and without postmodernism. It goes without saying that the very ideal is too slippery to even hold itself as pointed out by

Susan Bordo who seems to be agitating when she submits that, 'What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all.

The problem again lies intact when one has to sustain the essential womanhood of the woman while incorporating the essential differences characterizing their lived experiences. Postmodernism is perhaps too stingy to allow any fundamentals of Being of any type thus proposing the intricacies of an unleashed multiplicity and indefiniteness. The employment of the postmodernist agenda to discuss and reframe the domain of feminist epistemology is in fact never a wise choice. The fracturing and disintegrating tendencies of the former impede the inevitably constant move of the later towards an 'essential oneness' which is generous enough to incorporate the equally significant 'essential non-oneness' of the women. As Tania Modleski argues that with postmodernism, we actually inherit a 'feminism without women' when it is necessary to 'hold on to the category of women while recognizing ourselves to be in the process (an unending one) of defining and constructing the category.'

## **CONCLUSION**

It is feared that feminism, under the postmodernist paradigm, is hegemonized so much so by the later that it ultimately loses its fundamental assertions. Perhaps, when there is a dissolution of the canons of feminism into the broader category of postmodernism, it would not be wrong to uphold that for the later, the former is not more than a mere inclusive category. Why can't one take postmodernism itself as a master discourse which is inclined to deal with the challenges of posed by the feminist critical disposition in a most iconoclastic and at times eccentric manner? It acts as a framing narrative encapsulating the feminist debate and perpetuating it as a part of its larger whole. If this is the case, the male postmodernist theory actually jeopardizes the feminist critical standing by both assuming and reproducing the gesture of its modernist predecessor where it appears to be appropriating feminism as one of its inclusive positions. As a matter of fact, it should be the feminist theorists who should appropriate the nuts and bolts of a male postmodernist theory. Leaving feminism at the mercy of man-made schemata of appropriation is equivalent to giving up its legitimate slogan of equilibrium between the two sexes. What preference, privilege or even balance feminism seeks today when the very race it speaks for will cease to survive and even exist at a certain point in time and theory?

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