

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

Westernness of Indian Feminism...?

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"...The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally..." (p. 52).

– Mohanty

Women's studies is distinctive for its evolving perspectives on women's status. The above statement by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" reflects that the over-arching concept of Feminism, which has its origin in Europe and America, becomes unsuitable when relocated in the third world countries like India. Feminism has been articulated differently in different parts of the world, at different periods in time, by different people. A broad definition of feminism can be, "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation" (Chaudhuri, xiv). Recognizing sexism alone is not enough; it must be challenged through action. Contemporary feminism strives for women's equality, dignity, and freedom to shape their bodies and lives, at home and beyond. Western Feminism emerged as a powerful challenge to gender equations and existing power structures at all levels including family, economy and polity. Early equal-rights feminism, sparked by Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, culminated in the Suffragette Movement's fight to eliminate the political and social barriers preventing women from fully participating in society. **First-wave feminism** focused primarily on securing legal and formal equality between men and women. By the 1960s, **second-wave feminism** adopted a radical, revolutionary agenda aimed at transforming society as a whole. Theoretically, this shift incorporated perspectives from Marxism, psychoanalysis, anarchism, and critical theory. In the United States, the movement intersected with the Black civil rights struggle, leading advocates to parallel the oppression of women with imperialist colonization. Consequently, activists argued that liberation required systemic changes not just economically and politically, but also culturally and psychologically. This broad challenge to patriarchy eventually merged with anti-militarism and environmental movements, giving rise to **ecofeminism**. But even the 'third wave feminism' with its absolute emphasis on heterogeneity

fails in third world countries like India. Furthermore, although, it claims to be more sensitive to local, diverse voices of feminism and rejects a universalistic perspective on a single feminist standpoint, it becomes unsuitable to a great extent to Indian society which thrives on rigid hierarchies and age-old value systems. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri, in her *Introduction to Feminism in India* (2004), points out, “Recognition of plurality and diversity in cultures and feminisms may appear routine and a desirable political norm today, particularly in significant sections of western academia and quite certainly in western feminism. But I would think that in India this battle for recognition of difference had to be worked out independently without the accepted terminology of today’s western feminism or multiculturalism” (p. xxii).

Academic research into both the history of anti-patriarchal movements and the impact of feminist activism is constantly evolving and expanding. Taking the above discussion into account, I wish to pose questions about the Westernness of feminism in India. My purpose in the paper will be to explore reasons as to why fresh questioning is not only required but also is essential to understand its current implications. I wish to undertake this by, firstly, analyzing some of the parameters of Western and Indian feminisms highlighting some of the differences. I would also be looking at the issues that are peculiar to and concern Indian feminism attempting answers to questions like, Does Indian Feminism have a theory? Is theory needed at all? Does the parameters set by Western feminism applicable to the Indian situation? In the final section, I would be carrying this analysis further by looking at two contemporary Indian women authors Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande assessing their fiction in order to look at some issues which arise in Indian feminism and how they are treated differently.

While deeply interconnected with Western feminist discourse, the Indian women’s movement is uniquely characterized by its powerful alliances with other grassroots social movements. But at the same time, it would be unjustified to deny that though Indian feminism has its roots in its western counterpart, it has taken its own form and has evolved differently due to factors like distinct cultural identity and diversity. In fact, western theories have been restructured and mediated for at least a century by the formation of disciplines in the Indian Institutional context, such as sociology, economics, history or literature, and, more recently, by domains like women’s studies. Western concepts be it feminism or any other philosophy or idea has often occupied distinct trajectories in our academic and political contexts, with history as their point of departure, these lines of inquiry have potentially conceptualized patriarchy and gender anew. Colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a discursive or political suppression of heterogeneity of the subjects in question. This is true of the ‘first wave’ feminism in Europe and America. However, the debates in contemporary feminist theory produce an urgent political necessity of forming strategic coalitions across class, race and national boundaries. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, insists that the western feminist discourse ‘colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world’, thereby producing a composite, singular third-world woman (p. 51). Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its

role in a global economic and political framework. It has probably failed to realise that, the assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. Furthermore, it has become mandatory for feminists in non-western countries to look up to the western models as their very entry into modernity has been mediated through colonialism, and like many other disciplines that entered in the Indian psyche (as theories and ideas) from the west, feminism too has percolated in the Indian conscious primarily as a western theory. Any discussion on feminism, therefore, has to confront the question of its indebtedness to its originator in the west.

The early Feminists in India already dominated by western liberalism, socialism as well as feminism expressed their form of it in colonial India. The debates in India, then and now, not only reveal a complex relationship with the west but also raise significant questions about how Indian feminism stands differentiated and distinct from its source in the west. It is important to appreciate the changing contexts within which feminism in India has evolved. From Sarojini Naidu who denied being tagged a ‘feminist’ to women like Anandibai Joshi, and Pandita Ramabai, have shown diverse facets of Indian feminism in its various developmental and evolutionary stages. For instance, the feminist movements of 1980s and 1990s argued for ‘indigenous feminism’ which claimed affinity to Indian heritage and Shakti principles as against a western heritage. But, in the present context, the term itself stands open to interpretation resulting from the fact that indigenous itself is being recreated, elaborated, redistributed and rewritten. While the question of western hegemony in the colonial period is obvious and also much written about, issues in a world apparently decolonized are far more complex, particularly today when feminism has been increasingly institutionalized and has on occasion become part of dominant international politics.

For Indian feminists the entry into the public space and awareness of the women’s question is inextricably linked to its struggle to define itself using its own parameters rather than merely relocating itself using western ideals. Feminism, in India, has to be dealt with differently as it forms a part of hierarchical structure of Indian society where it frequently gets tied up with questions of race, caste, class, region and, last but not the least, religion. The central point here is that the very idea of personhood for third world feminists is different in as much as the fact that the slogan “the personal is political” narrates that there are multiple dimensions of gender and oppression which confront the third world women, particularly Indian. The ambivalence towards the term feminism is not unique to India. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty also mentions, ‘the term feminism is itself questioned by many third world women. Further, feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism and homophobia. To the question whether feminism in a western construct, Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan argue that, it is posed more as an “allegation” rather than as a question. They further argue that like

feminism the ‘industrial revolution, Marxism, socialism were also not born in India but these ideas are equally relevant for the sub-continent’. Though the term feminism might be foreign, but the concept ‘stands for a transformational process’ (p. 6). Furthermore, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, who talks about how difficult it for Indian feminism to dissociate itself from ‘western feminism’ blames it on the sparsity of any theoretical writing in India on the subject. This is because, she insists, ‘the International academic division of labour presumes that theorization is the preserve of western concern and expertise’ (p. xii). Though there is no dearth of history of women’s movement in India, but, the conceptual history behind these movements is absent. It is evident that the situation in India is altogether different. There is a manifest distinction between the personal in western and non-western societies. In Indian context, this distinction emanates from the largely communitarian and extended-family complex of relations. This phenomenon is very distinct from the spatially atomized individual existence that is more typical of western societies. The Indian family has always been divided into hierarchies. The several hierarchies within the family (age, sex and position), or within the community (particularly caste, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power) have been sustained by combination of custom, functionality and religious belief. The harshness and oppressive nature of these hierarchies is hushed up under the garb of a series of codes which guide the behaviour and conduct of the people involved. A deep sense of inferiority and obligation towards the male members thus governs the behaviour of women in Indian society. The concept of equality and individual freedom is alien to Indian women. These concepts which have their origin in western liberalism are still looked at with doubt here. The greatest obstacle to improvement in the status of women is the value system by which they abide. Devotion towards the male members of the family, be it father, brother or husband is cultivated among girls of all religions. This have been upheld through diverse legends dictating women towards an ideal conduct which in itself carries a means to such behaviour which is to remain a silent bearer of the adversities. the Indian tradition has always encouraged the subservience of women who are applauded for their self-effacement and thus promoted their subjection. This makes women reluctant about exercising their legal and constitutional rights which are already extensively available to them unlike the women in the west who had to undertake a long struggle to obtain them. Thus, what the feminist struggle in India quintessentially needs is that it must focus on cultivating the attitudes required for building the necessary public commitment. Also, the course of action that Indian feminists need is not as much a battle against male domination but against the value systems in which women’s inferiority to men is considered ideal. As Madhu Kishwar too asserts, “men and women who fought valiant struggles for women’s rights in India at the same time that feminists in Europe and America were waging their battles – did not feel the need to use the term ‘feminism’ for their work which would imply a gender warfare as it did in the west” (p. 38). Therefore, an understanding of the complex matrix of patriarchy and cultural stereotypes produced by age-old value systems is necessary and crucial to our understanding Indian feminism. As Suma Chitnis, in her essay titled “Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian

Convictions”, highlights that, “although the deprivations, exploitations and oppressions suffered by women are almost identical both in West and East, there are basic differences in the value system and historical circumstances in which they are pitched” (p. 8). It is true that historical circumstances and value systems have rendered the women’s issue different in India from the issues in the west. A careful consideration of this distinctiveness and its implication is, therefore, necessary to our understanding of the problems concerning gender discrimination. Chitnis further points out various spheres where the perceptions of Indian feminists seem to diverge from their comrades in the west. She says, ‘By far the most conspicuous of these in average Indian woman’s disapproval of feminist anger. The second is their somewhat mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and relative inability to tune to the demands for equality and personal freedom’ (p. 10).

Today, feminists in India have gone beyond mere legal reforms to end discrimination; they are working towards *emancipation* of women. Feminism, therefore, now includes the struggle against women’s subordination to the male within the home; against their exploitation by the family; against their continuing low status at work, in society and in the culture and religion of the country; against their double burden in production and reproduction. To elucidate this further an assessment of Anita Desai’s **Fire on the Mountain** (1977) and Shashi Deshpande’s **That Long Silence** (1988) is undertaken to find out how far these women writers have carried the cause of feminism through their fiction and how is their brand of feminism distinctively Indian.

Anita Desai (1937-) is one of those few Indian novelists in English who have tried to understand closely the predicament of Indian women. Her forte is the quest of sensibility and her writings expose inner realities and psychic echoes of her female characters. The most recurrent themes in all her novels are the hazards and complexities of man-woman relationship, the founding and nurturing of individuality and establishing of individualism of her characters. She is conscious of her role as a woman writer and has tried her best to maintain the tradition for women writers. **Fire on the Mountain** focuses on the character of Nanda Kaul, the widow of a Vice-chancellor. In her old age Nanda intends to live a retired life without any friend or relation in her secluded bungalow at Kasauli. Solitude and self-exploration thus become the themes which occupy a major portion of the book. The study of isolation experienced by women in a male dominated society where they are not allowed to play any active role in decision-making become significant aspects which connect the book to the predicament of women in society, in general. The institution of marriage as portrayed in the novel becomes nothing but a trap in which the protagonist is caught and can do nothing except to languish in misery. Every attempt she makes to redefine herself inevitably ends in lack of communication which leads only to alienation and leads her to turn solipsistic. Nanda Kaul’s detachment in the novel is a result of her disillusionment at the hands of her Vice-Chancellor husband. The busy mechanical world where has lived as the Vice-Chancellor’s wife has stifled her and the peace and harmony she longed for eluded her, leaving her a prisoner-awaiting release. Now at this juncture of life she likes nothing but to keep her own company. The news of Raka’s

arrival disturbs her. She feels miserable and tries to suppress her anger and disappointment at not being left alone. Also, her friend Ila Das's arrival shatters her bubble of illusion still further and she has to face the harsh reality once more; the reality of her seclusion and the circumstances forcing her to it. She has already faced disillusionment at the hands of her husband. As the wife of Vice-Chancellor, she had everything in life except for the love and loyalty of her husband. This is not just true of Nanda Kaul but Ila Das who has seen glorious days when her father had been alive is now rendered helpless as a result of family disintegration, after her father's death. She has to take up a job. But despite her sincere involvement in her job, as a welfare officer, she meets a tragic end. Her life suggests another dimension of misery and loneliness and meaningless existence. Further, although, Nanda Kaul, on the other hand, has fulfilled her role as a wife and a mother with a congealed smile on her face, she is left lonely and neglected, very much like Jaya of **That Long Silence** by Shashi Deshpande. But all this suffering by women at the hands of patriarchy and oppression does not lead to a "female utopia" but ends with the death of Ila Das and fire on the mountain. The fact that Nanda Kaul still carries her husband's surname signifies that it is difficult for Indian women like her to break the shackles of marriage even when it has given them nothing but suffering and silence. It is almost impossible for them to escape the harsh reality which favours endless readjustments rather than rejection.

Shashi Deshpande's (1938-) writing career reflects an ongoing process of problematizing feminists conflicts and compromises, resolutions and irresolutions, ironies and affirmations, triumph and tragedies. The major themes of her novels are man-woman relationship, desire, gender discrimination and marginalization. It may however be noted that the trajectory of feminist concerns that Deshpande travels doesn't necessarily correspond to that of the feminist women writers in the west. Her perceptions of women's liberation and autonomy are deeply entrenched in the Indian women's situatedness within the socio-cultural and economic spaces and paradigms of the country while the western feminist writers often stay independent of them.

That Long Silence (1988) is Deshpande's fifth novel which shows Deshpande as a staunch feminist but not a feminist writer. She unfolds the problems of women in the patriarchal society in a very positive way. The novel portrays the suffering and deprivation of a woman's pains, her cries, her anxiety. But unlike Desai's heroine, Deshpande's female protagonist cannot totally reject the network of relatedness within which she has to find her own space. In Deshpande, we move in a world where values are upheld confidently and positively, where the filtering consciousness speaks with the authority of being incontestably right. Jaya, the protagonist and heroine of **That Long Silence** is an intelligent woman with good academic qualifications, a bright career and a considerable amount of success. But none of these attributes enable her to have a 'room of her own'. In other words, they do not provide her a respectable position in the eyes of Mohan, her husband nor make her economically independent. Gender conditioning has made her vulnerable and silent. Life incognito in a flat in Dadar along with her husband becomes a trap for her where silence that she has learned to

keep becomes more profound. She is compelled to repeat “A pair of bullocks yoked together” (p. 8). Living like this with Mohan seems meaningless to her “*We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us*” (p. 185). Jaya capitalizes fully on this rare chance of introspection and searching self analysis to relocate her life on a different plane. It is as if the return to the roots triggers off the whole complex process. Amidst all this, what concerns her most, is the fear of denting the façade of a happy marriage. Trying to be a perfect wife and mother, Jaya had been neglecting her ‘real’ self. But, she realizes now that she was being defeated even in this. Her voice was being hushed up by the ideal notions thrust upon her by the male-dominated society. Towards the end of the novel, Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman who refuses to be merely a shadow of her husband. She firmly resolves to break the silence that has been at the root of all her troubles in her life; *I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us* (p. 192). It is noteworthy to observe that even at this juncture, Jaya with her emancipated inner self does not decide to walk out of the marital ties but is eagerly waiting for her husband. The novel ends with her anticipation of Mohan’s return. Finally, Deshpande makes it clear that hers is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the cause of all troubles. Rather, her writing deals with the inner mind of the women, which, in other words, is a very significant aspect of feminism unique to India and many other third world countries.

To conclude, the fact that our dependence on western theories should not be cause for paralysis, quite and opposite. Infact, as the above discussion demonstrates that though the basis for Indian feminism lies in the west but it has grown on its own influenced and shaped by various factors to suit the Indian situation where institutions like family, society and marriage still have strong ties with people. Thus, it is important to take careful note of the differences in the ethical and cultural contexts of feminism in western and in Indian societies. India is, as yet, new to the ideology of personal freedom. Though, political freedom from the British rule and the adoption of democracy and its accompanying value systems have opened up totally new opportunities for personal freedom, self-hood and autonomy, both for men and women, but the real challenge to feminism in India is to help Indian women realize this selfhood in full measure. Finally, to reiterate in Suma Chitnis’ words,

‘The temptation to follow the paths blazed by western feminists, in research as well as in action, may be irresistible. However, one hopes for a revival of sensitivity to the uniqueness of the Indian situation and of the capacity to respond to this uniqueness by forging new ways’ (p. 25).

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