Brown Womanism: Tracing the Different Layers of Indian Feminism

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Abstract : Western feminist movement is usually divided into four "waves". The first-wave feminism focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. Second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination. Third-wave feminism sought to challenge or avoid what it deemed the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle-class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Third-wave feminists often focused on "micro-politics" and challenged the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females. The historical circumstances and values in India make women's issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. Suggesting that, unlike their western counterparts, India's women have always been liberated, Sarojini Naidu attempted to dismantle the opposition between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' that structures the imperial project. The idea of women as 'powerful' was accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion and this has retained visibility in all sections of society by providing women with traditional 'cultural spaces' Indian feminist scholars and activists had to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India.Dimpal Jain suggests that the term 'feminism' is contested because it is foreign. There is, thus, a need for a new term that encompasses the multifarious factors that influence the lives and rights of Indian women.

IndexTerms – **Womanism, Brown Womanism, Indian Feminism, Feminism.**

Western feminist movement is usually divided into four "waves". The first-wave feminism was a period of feminist activity during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the United States. Originally it focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage. Yet, feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were still active in campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive, and economic rights at this time. In Britain the Suffragettes and, possibly more effectively, the Suffragists campaigned for the women's vote. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928 this was extended to all women over twenty-one. American first-wave feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919), granting women the right to vote in all states.

Second-wave feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. The scholar Imelda Whelehan suggests that the second wave was a continuation of the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the UK and USA.

The scholar Estelle Freedman compares first and second-wave feminism saying that the first wave focused on rights such as suffrage, whereas the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination. The feminist activist and author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan "The Personal is Political" which became synonymous with the second wave. Second-wave feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures.

Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s, arising as a response to perceived failures of the second wave and also as a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave. Third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasize the experiences of upper middle-class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Third-wave feminists often focus on "micro-politics" and challenge the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females. The third wave has its origins in the mid-1980s. Feminist leaders rooted in the second wave like Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many other black feminists, sought to negotiate a space within feminist thought for consideration of race-related subjectivities. Third-wave feminism also contains internal debates between difference feminists such as the psychologist Carol Gilligan (who believes that there are important differences between the sexes) and those who believe that there are no inherent differences between the sexes and contend that gender roles are due to social conditioning.

The historical circumstances and values in India make women's issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. Sarojini Naidu rejected the imperial feminist stance that Indian women must be rescued from oppressive tradition by colonial modernity. Instead, she recasted Indian women as full participants in the world movement of global feminism going as far calling Indian women as original feminists. She insisted that the idea of essential equality of man and woman and their cooperation in every sphere of life was not new to Indians, in fact "…hundred years ago the foundation of Indian civilization was laid on this very basis".

Asha Nadkari opined that Naidu's rhetoric mirrored a larger nationalist project that used Indian women as signifiers of Indian nationalism's particularity and mobilizes the universalizing discourse of a global feminism to construct a feminist teleology in which elite Indian are more advanced than their Western counterparts. While in her political life Naidu was devoted to the advancement of women, her poems are populated with women in subservient postures. Naidu rejected the term 'feminist' as too western, as the term did not fit into the Indian scenario. In her estimation, Indian feminisms task was not to work toward liberation to come but to recuperate the enlightened status women had in the past. Despite gender equalities in the present, she argued that India had its own tradition of equality that simply required restoration. But history had altered the social political situation in India with the advent of colonialism that the prospect of 'going back' per se was a task that was next to impossible.

Partha Chatterjee located national cultural difference in the inner sphere of the home, suggesting that the derivative project of modern nationalism takes place in the outer sphere of the world. By locating the primary agent of change in the outside world of the masculine public sphere, Chatterjee suggested a traditional ground upon which outside forces work. Within this rhetoric it is easy to discern the figure of a passive feminity acted upon by forceful male agency. Thus the feminist reform was swallowed by a masculine nationalist agenda invested in preserving gender difference over gender equality. The problem of the native patriarchy fell to the wayside, the subalternization of the women within this discourse gets erased.

Miralini Sinha complicated Chatterjee's argument by demonstrating that the late colonial period saw women asserting themselves as political subjects in recognizably modern ways, as indicated by the emergence of women's organizations, such as the Women's Indian association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All India Women's Association) AIWC). In Sinha's assessment, this was a unique moment in Indian nationalist feminism in it that it allows Indian feminists to exceed cultural nationalist formulations to of women as representatives of nation and community and instead form a political constituency as women:
" The political demands of the women were…beginning to be articulated by means of a new set of concepts – equality, rights, representation – that were associated less with the imperatives of enduring cultural or national 'difference' than with a liberal political discourse of women themselves as rights-bearing subjects."(Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, p.81)

Sinha thus offers an important corrective to Chatterjee by demonstrating how Indian female activists reject a cultural nationalist script for what she calls an 'agnostic script liberal universalism' that contests communal and sectarian identifications in favour of gender.

Meanwhile Sarojini Naidu distanced herself from Western feminism as early as 1912-14 soujourn in London, stating in an interview in the London Forward:

"We have never had a feminist movement (of the kind which existed in Britain) in India. There has never been any need for anything of that kind" (Banerjee, *Sarojini Naidu, the Traditional Feminist*, p.24)

In making this statement, Naidu rendered feminism superfluous to India for reasons of British cultural particularity rather than Indian. India might lack a feminist movement of the kind which existed in Britain, but only because, unlike Britain, it has no need for one. As Naidu elaborated seventeen years later in her 1930s speech, "To be feminist is to acknowledge that one's life has been repressed." The demand for granting preferential treatment to women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been by the side of men in council and in the fields of battle. Though the British need feminism in order to combat a patriarchal culture that insists on the inferiority of women, India has a long-standing history of gender equality.

By suggesting that, unlike their western counterparts, India's women have always been liberated, Naidu attempted to dismantle the opposition between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' that structures the imperial project. In doing so she claims for India an alternative modernity that depends upon a mixture of the modern and the ancient. In insisting that Indian women have always been modern, Naidu's is not simply an argument that metaphorically elevates women's status within the home to women's larger status in the nation – she argues that 'not only was it (the ancient Indian women's) sweet privilege to tend to the hearth-fires and sacrificial fires in the happy and narrow seclusion of her home, but wide as humanity were her compassionate service, her intellectual triumphs and her saintly renunciations." Naidu contests a separate sphere ideology to argue that women are not merely, as the title of the lecture claims, "the soul of India", but they are also important actors in the public life of the nation. In this formulations, Indian nationalism depended upon Indian feminism rather than the reverse. As she commands Indian men in her 1906 speech to the Social Council of Calcutta, the "Education of Indian Women':

Restore to your women their ancient rights, for as I have said it is we and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active cooperation at all points of progress, all your congress and conference are invalid…Educate your women, and the nation will take care itself for its true today, as it was yesterday, and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle is the power that rules the world. (Naidu, *Speeches and Writings*, p.198)

Pre-colonial social structures and women's role in them reveal that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the west. Colonial essentialization of 'Indian Culture' and reconstruction of Indian womanhood as the epitome of that culture through social reform movements resulted in political theorization in the form of nationalism rather than as feminism alone. Thus historical circumstances and values in India makes women's issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. The idea of women as 'powerful' was accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion and this has retained visibility in all sections of society by providing women with traditional 'cultural spaces'.

Indian feminist scholars and activists had to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India. They defined feminism in time and space in order to avoid blindly following western ideas. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures- age, ordinal status, and relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes such as dowry, siring son etc…- kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. However, several communities in India such as the Nairs of Kerala, certain Maratha clans and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest woman rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender neutral.

The heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies and so also are the multiple feminisms. Hence feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation, it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and women as a group. The widely used definition is "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, by conscious action by woman or by men and to ensure that there is positive change to rectify the situation." Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of feminity and masculinity as biologically determined categories opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women.

The concept of equality was alien in India till the liberally exposed western educated Indians introduced it in the early 19th century. However, the term did not gain meaning or become an operational principle in Indian life until the country gained independence in 1947 and adopted a democratic government.

It is crucial to note that the western concept of feminism is something that Indian women have difficulty identifying with. The concept of feminism in India is unique within the context of Indian culture. It cannot be directly compared to western feminism because the social as well as the cultural scenario is vastly different. The characteristics that western culture would label as forms of oppression, Indian women would label as forms of 'sorrow'. The difference is significant and should be noted to understand that Indian women and westerners might see the same issues in a completely different light – such as hunger, poverty, disease, infant death, use of their bodies in labour by their landlords, ruthlessness of custom, burden of tradition, unrelenting demands of ritual, beating without reason etc…

There are also many traditions and customs that have been a huge part of India and its people for hundreds of years. Religious laws and expectations, or personal laws enumerated by each specific religion often conflict with the Indian constitution, eliminating rights and powers women should legally have. Despite the crossovers in legality, the Indian government does not interfere with the religious and personal laws of people.

Thus it is safe to say that women experience gender in different ways. Black women experience various forms of oppression simultaneously, as a complex interaction of race, class and gender that is more than the sum of its parts. To focus on gender as the primary locus of oppression as per the mainstream feminist thought, is to force women of colour to fragment their experience in a way that does not reflect he reality of their lives. The recognition of women's differences, however, does not negate the fundamental premise of feminism that women are oppressed as women.

If it is race, gender and class that oppresses the black women, the cause of Indian women's oppression has equal if not more layers. Indian women are primarily repressed by their religion, secondary to which is caste and then by gender.

Dimpal Jain preferred 'womanism' over 'feminism' because to her the latter as a term was contested and she did not like how "it fit in her mouth". She felt that the term was "uncomfortable and scratchy", almost like a foreign substance that she was forced to consume, even as white women continued to smile with comforting looks of familiarity and pride (Jain and Turner, *Purple is to Lavender*, p.68).

It is significant to note that Jain's statement that "the crux of the politics of naming is that the names serve as identifiers and are not neutral when attached to social movements, ideas and groups of people. Naming and labelling become politicized acts when they serve to determine any type of membership at a group level (Jain and Turner, *Purple is to Lavender*, p.73)

This statement illustrates that if an individual identifies with feminism, they may do so for particular reasons. However, those reasons may not be evident to the general public because of the connotation that the world of feminism bring with it in terms of social movements, ideas and groups of people. Individuals want something to identify with that expresses and supports their beliefs holistically. They want something that they can embrace to the fullest without any hint of regret. Similarly, Alice Walker states:

"I didn't choose womanism because it is better than feminism. I chose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it…because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully see." (Jain and Turner, *Purple is to Lavender*, p.77-78)

For a majority of black women, feminism has failed to accurately and holistically describe them as individuals to the world that surrounds them. They feel as though it takes something new that it not already bound to a pre-determined master in order to capture this new movement.

The term 'womanism' coined by Alice Walker in her collection of essays titled as "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose" published in 1983 is defined as

(1)   Womanish (opposite of girlish i.e., frivolous, irresponsible and not serious). A black feminist or a feminist of colour. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is good for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Responsible. In charge. Serious.

(2)   Also, a woman who loves other woman, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength, sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist. Traditionally capable.

(3)   Loves music, loves dance, loves the moon, loves the spirit, and loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle, loves the folk, and loves herself regardless.

(4)   Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

African womanism deals with the African culture and therefore focuses on the struggles, experiences, desires and needs of African women. In the same way an ideology of presenting the struggles if Indian women or American women of Indian origin, the role of American man of Indian origin and their connectedness can be called Indian American womanism. This type of womanism can be traced in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, namely The Lowland. Lahiri's fiction presents the struggle of male and female, those personally and collectively create their own Indian American identity. In this connection, the American men of Indian origin are positively presented. With the help of such type of presentation Lahiri has tried to raise awareness of the strength of womanist maternity in the lives and actions of Indian male and female.

The womanism that Alice Walker presented is located within the African American female experience and it is different from African womanism. Similarly, the Indian-American womanist experience is different from that of the Indian womanist experience. The identity of the brown Indian women are entangled in various social, religious and political structures that the western feminist thought is inoperable in Indian scenario. Thus the term 'feminism' should be discarded in favour of 'Brown Womanism' as Alice Walker did with black feminism, to explore the nuances of the female brown experience. This non-separatist philosophy emphasizes the importance of men as well as women, where men are positively called forth for the betterment of women in the domestic and the public sphere. Without threatening the discourse on familial unit, brown womanism would be effective in eradicating soft patriarchy as well. Gradual fluidity of traditional gender roles could be brought about in a less inimical environment which would, in turn, result in healthy discourse regarding the rights of the women in the domestic as well as the public sphere.

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