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Western Feminism and Indian Womenhood- A Postmodern analysis

Aminesh Kumar

Research Scholar, Univ.Dept.of Political Science, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga

Abstract

This paper presents a postmodern analysis of Western feminism and Indian womanhood, challenging the metanarrative approach frequently employed in feminist studies. By reconceptualising 'Feminist Theory' as 'Theories of Feminism', the study compares Western feminism and Indian womanhood as distinct theoretical frameworks rather than variations of a single narrative. The research critically examines the homogeneous understanding of "women" and explores how intersecting identities of gender, race, class, and nationality shape women's experiences and societal roles. Drawing on postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, the paper highlights the limitations of Western feminist ideals of individualism, equality, and autonomy when applied to diverse cultural contexts. In contrast, Indian womanhood is presented as a complex interplay of caste, religion, colonial history, and socio-economic factors, emphasising collective rights and cultural sensitivity. The study posits that Indian feminism aligns more closely with postmodern traditions, resisting the imposition of Western feminist frameworks and constructing a discourse that acknowledges the diversity of women's experiences within India. This comparative analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of feminist theories and their application across different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Postmodern feminism, Indian womanhood, Intersectionality,Cultural contextualization, Feminist theory critique

Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the expansive domain of feminist theory. A meticulous,word-by-word analysis of any topic may not best serve the intellectual freedom; therefore, this study approaches feminist theory through postmodern lens, which can be interpreted as a comparative method. The conceptual resources of postmodernism, especially drawing on theories of cultural construction and signification, and critiques of essentialism, became indispensable tools in such an agenda(Chaudhuri.M 2004;60-61).The comparison between Western and Indian feminism is extensively explored. Numerous scholarly article are available for insight into this field. Identifying a research problem within this area is both straightforward and challenging. However, for the purposes of this paper, we argue that existing scholars often adheres to a metanarrative framework. Many works accept feminism as a western concept and then apply Western theoretical tools to study Indian women, resulting in a biased approach. To substantiate our argument, we will employ deconstruction and reconceptualize ‘Feminist Theory’ as ‘Theories of Feminism’ or alternatively, as ‘Western Feminism’ and ‘Indian Womenhood’. This approach allow us to compare two distinct theories rather than merely contrasting two narratives of a

single theory . Firstly, feminist theory shlould critically examine and challenges the simplistic and uniform understanding of "women"as a single, homogenous category.(Haraway Donna, 1991)
How do we understand women's roles within the specific framework of gender , race,national, and class identities ? What is the connection between a women's identity as a women and other identity markers like race, nationality,ethinicity, class and sexuality? How does a women's positioning within these diverse social identity categories influence her self-conception, both as an individual and as a participant in society? What does this reveal about the sufficiency of current conceptual models of the self, collective identities and agency and the potential for developing alternative feminist models?.(Gedalof.I, 2005) The answer to the above questions must take into account several significant developments over the past decades. A rich and complex body of feminist writings has emerged, which in ways has become institutionalized within academia as well as within policymaking, whether by various states or international agencies. Additionally,the rise of multiculturalism and postmodernism in the West since the 1980s not only recognized but also celebrated diversity and plurality, including the acknowledgment of divergent feminisms. The growth of postcolonial studies, driven by the writings of non-western scholars based in the West and a shift towards poststructuralist theory, has further enriched this discourse. Finally , the greater visibility of India and Indian scholars in recent decades, particularly within the context of globalization , has also played a crucial role in shaping these discussions.

Being a "Women"

Simon de beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex,* argues that femininity is socially constructed, with women being defined in relation to men rather than on their own terms. She describes women as incident and inessential, contrasted with men, who are seen the essential. However, this argument primarily applies to the context of Western feminism. Unlike western individualism, which emphasizes personal freedom , Indian culture historically views individuals as part of a larger social collective, prioritizing cooperation and self-denial for the greater goods. This cultural context, coupled with religious notions of women as "powerful" figures, allowed for a different conceptualization of women's roles, often embedded within patriarchal structures rather than opposing them outright. Consequently , women's issues in India have often been tied to broader nationalistic movements rather than solely feminist agendas. (Chatterjee,Partha. 1990)
The core idea that stands out in our philosophical tradition is the belief that a person is not just an individual among others but is fundamentally interconnected with family, community, and ultimately the entire human race. This perspective leads us to view society not as mere collection of individuals, but as a living organism where each person complements the other, contributing to the creation, substenance, and reinforcement of an evolved social order. In the postcolonial context the portrayal of the "new Indian women" in popular culture as a figure meant to reconcile the tension between tradition and modernity in Indian society, while simultaneously downplaying the real conflicts women face. This divergence from western feminism stems from the unique cultural and historical context of India, unlike western feminism which often emphasizes individualism and breaking away from traditional roles, Indian feminism has to navigate the complexities of maintaining cultural heritage while advocating for women's rights. This has led to a distinct feminist discourse in India, where the focus is on balancing these conflicting demands rather than outright rejecting traditional norms, as is more common in Western feminist movements.

Western Feminism

Feminism, as Walter(2005) and Witt (2004) assert, emerged in the 19th century within Anglo-Saxon and Northwestern European countries, with movements like the Women's Movements and the Declaration of Sentiments challenging the "second-class citizenship of women." Hubertine Auclert was the first to use the term "feminism" around the 1800s, defining it as a synonym for the women's movement, with roots in the latin word Femina meaning woman. Simon de Beauvoir further explored feminism in *The Second Sex(1949)* , a view that aligns with Western feminism's focus on deconstructing societal and cultural norms that have historically oppressed women.

Feminism, a dynamic and evolving social movement, has historically been characterized by distinct phases, often referred to as "waves". According to LeGates(2001), before the mid-19th century, feminist networks were typically ephemeral loosely organized. However, the formation of more enduring movements in Europe and North America marked the emergence of first-wave feminism. This period, focused primarily on achieving legal equality for women, particularly in areas like suffrage, education, and employment(Ritzer & Ryan,2010). The first wave of feminism was driven by the suffrage movement and the demands of middle-class white women for equal opportunities. Betty Friedan's seminal work, "*The Feminine Mystique*"(1963), encapsulates the era's primary goal: enabling women to find personal fulfillment in various aspects of their lives, including careers and family (kowaleski-Wallace,2009; O'Brien,2009'; Witt,2004). The first wave's momentum waned during the Great Depression, setting stage for future feminist waves(Ritzer,2005).

The Second Wave emerging from the 1960s and continuing into the early 1980s, expanded the feminist agenda to address a broader range of gender inequalities and social issues. Unlike its predecessor, the second waves was marked by diverse feminist ideologies and movements, leading to significant scholary criticism and debate(Plain & Sellers, 2007). Nancy Chodorow's influential book, "*The Reproduction of Mothering*"(1978), challenged traditional gender roles by examining the psychological and sociological foundations of masculinity and femininity (Ritzer & Ryan , 2010). This wave focused on deep-seated issues of gender inequality and aimed to extend women's rights neyond legal forms, addressing gender roles and societal expectations in greater depth;(Witt, 2004; Walters, 2005; LeGates,2001)

The third wave , which began in the early 1990s and lasted untill around 2012, brought a fresh perspectives to feminist discourse. Rebecca Walker, a prominent figures in this wave, defined it with her book "Becoming the Third Wave"(1992) (Copenhaver,2002). The third wave shifted the focus from victimization to empowerment, with young women emaphasizing agency and self- expression. The rise of digital platforms faciliated this shift, as feminist websites provided resources and mobilized activism[4] (Walker, R. 2001). Moreover, the third wave embraced a sex-positive culture and the reclamation of femininity, using women's bodies as a means of political expression(O'Brien,2009). While the core issues of reproductive rights, body image, and violence persisted, the approach became more inclusive and diverse, reflecting a broader range of women's experiences(Ritzer,2005).

The emergence of the fourth wave around 2012 marks a significant evolution in feminist activism. Characterized by its use of social media and digital tools, this wave focuses on empowering women and promoting intersectionality(Abrahams, J. 2017). Unlike previous waves, the fourth wave operates in a decentralized manner, relying on viral social media campaigns rather than formal organizations. This wave has been influenced by global events , such as the 2012 protests in India following the brutal rape and murder of a female student, and th case in Turkey where a victim was blamed for her attire(Cornelissen,2019). The fourth wave highlights the global nature of feminist issues and reflects a

commitment to achieving gender equality through new technological means. Although the fifth wave is still emerging and remains well documented, it represents a shift toward more radical goals. Unlike earlier waves that sought to reform existing systems, the fifth wave aims to dismantle current structure and create a new societal framework that prioritizes the needs of all marginalized individuals(Retta,2020)

Indian Womenhood

The emergence and growth of women's movement in India can be distinguish from western feminist "waves" in following developments- The 19th-century social reform movements brought the women's issue to the forefront leading to the rise of women's literature and voices during that era, The early 20th century saw the formation of women's groups and increased political involvement by women, After independence the state domesticated the women's issue, The 1970s and 1980s marked a resurgence of feminism with new debates and challenges , Since the 1990s feminism has undergone a significant paradigm shift.(Chaudhuri, M. 2012).

The emergence of feminism in India during the mid-1970s highlighted notable differences in the way feminist ideas were received compared to their reception in the West. The Western feminist framework did not resonate with their cultural context, sometimes leading to alienation from the movement. Western feminist approach does not fully consider India's unique historical and cultural circumstances. Indian women sought to liberate themselves from the oppressive structure of tradition, yet simultaneously desired to affirm the ancient wisdom embedded within those same traditions(Mani,1989). Additionally,the struggle for India's independence from colonial rule was viewed as a prerequisite for women's freedom. Consequently, due to complex realtionship between feminism and Western colonialism, many Indian women involved in both the women's and national movements chose to distance themselves from the label of "feminist". (Chaudhuri, M., Verma, M. K. 2017)

Indian Feminism distinctly contrasts with Western feminism by rejecting the traditional masculinist ideals that sharply divide reason from emotion and equate justice with abstract impartiality. Instead, It values indigenous knowledge and local expertise, critiquing the western feminist tendency to portray women's experience as a singular, universal category. Indian feminism views society not as a mere collection of individuals but as a cohesive and interdependent whole, where roles are assigned based on individual nature and aptitude, thereby promoting social satbility and collective well- being. Grounded in cultural traditions that integrate body, mind, and spirit, Indian feminism prioritizes substantive rationality and collective interdependence over the western ideals of technological rationality and individual autonomy. Central to this approach are the concepts of Ardhanarishwar, representing the unity of masculine and feminine principles, and Sahdharmini, which emphasizes partnership in both spritual and wordly duties. Indian feminism must challenge the homogenizing narratives of Western feminism, advocating for a diverse and context-sensitive approach that honours the unique cultural and social realities of Indian women. This perspective echoing the insights of bell hooks, underscore the importance of lived experience in shaping feminist consciousness and resisting dominant hegemonies rooted in rascism and sexism. (Nirmal.A, Dey.S ,2021)

Figures like Pandita Ramabai became central to early feminist wave, supported by institutions like Seva Sadan and Vanit Samaj, which mobilized women and promoted feminist ideals. Hindu feminists, while critical of their religious traditions, often worked within those structures, balancing reform wuth the constraints imposed by their faith. Different from feminist utopians, women movement in india did not

aspire to a gender-free world. They recognized the existence of two sexes, each with distinct bodies, reproductive roles and varying level of physical strength, and thus advocated for complementary roles rather than the elimination of gender distinctions.

Hindu women, unlike their western christian counterparts, questioned their religion and customs but didn't reject them. Instead, they worked within society, even with its limitations. Some Hindu feminist leader used a strategy of blending in and adapting to overcome challenges. They created separate institutions for women, which played a key role in helping Hindu women embrace modern ideas and advancing the women, which played a key role in helping women embraces modern ideas. These institutions allowed women to focus on improving their own lives and also helped change their roles in public life. The leaders behind these organization were smart and forward-thinkinh, managing to push for change while minimizing criticism from the broader Hindu society (Anagol, P. 2017). Indian feminists recognized the differences between men and women, particularly in reproduction and physical strength, and advocated for complementary roles rather than sameness. They believed women should be respected and valued for their unique contributions,not made identical to men. Their feminism focused on empowering women to reach their full potential as women, without trying to make them like men (ibid..).

Postmodernism , Indian womenhood and Western Feminism

C.T Mohanty critiques Western feminism from a postmodern perspective, highlighting how it homogenizes "Third World women" within feminist discourse. According to Mohanty, Western feminism often universalizes its own experience and values, portraying Indian womenhood and the experiences of other non- Western women as monolithic and oppressed. This approch, she argues, ignores the historical and cultural specifications of India womanhood, reducing it to simplistic stereotypes.Indian womenhood cannot be fully understood through the lens of western feminism,which frequently imposes its own standards and assumption on diverse culture. The article references Foucault's concept of the "juridico-discursive" model of power to critique the binary structures prevalent in feminist discourse, highlighting how these structures oversimplify power dynamics and reinforce a homogenous view of women's experience.(Mohanty,1984). Postmodernism is the celebration of differences within feminism and this is well illustrated in the feminist discourse of India.Indian feminism is deeply interwined with the country's specific socio-political context, including its colonial history, post-indepednence struggle, and the impact of caste, class and religion. While western feminist movements influenced Indian feminism, the latter developed its own unique trajectory, responding to local issues such as anti-dowry movements, the impact of economic liberalization, and communalism.(Agnihotri,I.,& Mazumdar, V.:1995).

Spivak critiques the tendency of western feminists to position themsekves as authoritative voices on the issues faced by women in the "third world", a practise that reinforces cultural hierarchies and binary divisions between the East and the West. By framing non – western women as marginal or oppressed, Western feminists contribute to the creation and maintenance of cultural canons that privilege Western norms as central and superior.(Al-wazedi, U.;2020). Through the lens of postmodernism, which challeges grand narrartives and emphasizes the plurality of perspectives, Spivak's critique support for the need to reognize the diverse and comples realities of Indian womanhood, which cannot be fully understood through a singular, Western feminist lens.Indian feminism, shaped by its unique socio-

cultural and political contexts, navigates the balance between embracing multiplicity and striving for collective action.

The current information revolution and the increasing use of digital platforms have fostered dialogue between Western and India feminism, enhancing the exchange of ideas and strategies across borders. This digital interconnectedness has promoted greater individuality within feminist thought, encouraging diverse voices and experiences to come to the forefront. Social media has broken down geographical boundaries , allowing for global engagement and real – time response to issues related to gender equality. For instance, movements like #MeToo have resonated globally, sparking conversations baout sexual harassment and assault across various cultures and countries. In India the Nirbhaya case mobilized both online and offline protests, highlighting the power of digital activism in galvanizing public opinion and influencing policy change.

However, in this emerging world, issues of "post-truth" and virtual reality have also complicated feminist activism. In an era where misinformation can spread rapidly, as Jean Baudrillard disucusses in "The Death of the Real," the boundaries between the truth and falsehood are increasingly blurred, making it challenging for feminist movements to maintain credibility and effectively counteract digital propaganda and cyber crime against women. Recently a news surfaced like this from Britain about "virtual rape in metaverse"(the hindu 2024/01/03) .Virtual reality and digital simulations have further created spaces where real – world gender issues can be trivialized or misrepresented, leading to a disconnect between online activism and offline realities. The digital world therefore, presents a paradox for contemporary feminism; while it offer unprecedented opportunities for connection and activism, it also risks diluting the authenticity and impact of feminist discourse.

Conclusion

This analysis highlights the diverse, fragmented, and context-specific nature of feminist movements, challenging the notion of a single, universal feminist experience. Western feminism, particularly in its early waves, often centred on the experience of white,middle-class women, emphasizing individualism,equality, and autonomy.Postmodern crtique reveal that this framework tends to universalize the experiences of these women, overlooking the varried and intersectional realities of race,class,sexuality,and ethnicity. For instance, the notion of "sameness" in Western feminism-advocating for Western liberals ideals, which may not resonate with all women, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. Postmodernism critique this by deconstructing the idea that there is a single, coherent subject of "women," instead suggesting that identity is fluid, contingent,and shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Indian womehood , on the other hand, emerge from a context where issues of caste, religion, colonial history. And socio-economic disparities are deeply interwined with gender. Unlike the Western focus on Individualism, India feminism often emphasizes collective rights, social justice, and the recognition of eomen's roles within their specific cultural and societal frameworks. Indian feminism have historically navigated the complexities of tradition and modernity, seeking to empower women while working within cultural norms.Indian feminism resisted the the impostion of a western feminist framework, instead constructing a discourse that is sensitive to local contexts and acknowledges the diversity of women's experience within India. Indian feminisn is more close to postmodern tradition .

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