

Beyond Separatist Feminism: An Indifference to Differences

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Abstract: This paper intends to critically examine the separatist impulse that motivates second-generation feminists, its articulation through inverted sexism and terrorism, its strengths and the limitations incumbent upon such an approach. Moving beyond the third approach, as proposed by Julia Kristeva, the paper posits a fourth attitude of focusing on the complementarity between the sexes. It argues that since both men and women are constructs and that since both are in a way oppressed by patriarchy, there is a need to move beyond an exclusionary, separatist impulse towards forming solidarities across gender, class, race, ethnicity, caste and other differences that merely divide the body politic.

Keywords: Separatism, second-wave feminism, terrorism, indifference to differences

Introduction:

Feminism as the struggle for women's social, economic, political and sexual rights, has been divided by various feminist scholars into stages for the purpose of analysis and theorization. Elaine Showalter terms the different stages "Feminine, Feminist and Female" in her seminal essay "The Female Tradition" (1977); others, including Virginia Woolf and Julia Kristeva, prefer to talk in terms of first-generation/wave, second-generation/wave and third generation/wave. While "the phases overlap" (Showalter 13) and "the word 'generation' implies less a chronology than a signifying space, both corporeal and desiring mental space . . . [an] attitude . . ." (Kristeva 209), the agenda of each wave is more or less clearly defined and generally agreed upon by various feminist writers and critics across the world.

The first generation was concerned with a socialist/egalitarian agenda, seeking insertion in the dominant socio-symbolic order; the second generation was governed by a Freudian/separatist impulse, refusing /rejecting "the socio-symbolic contract" (Kristeva 202) in order to form an "Amazon utopia" (Showalter 4) and the third aimed to win sexual equality, reproduction rights, right to abortion, contraception, right to homosexual relations for women across the world. This paper intends to critically examine the separatist impulse that motivates second-generation feminists, its articulation through

inverted sexism and terrorism, and the strengths and limitations incumbent upon such an approach.

Second-wave feminists support the formation of an exclusive “Amazon utopia, a country entirely populated by women and completely isolated from the male world” (Showalter 4). Helene Cixous posits the existence of an incipient “feminine writing”/ “écriture feminine”, a tool to express an experience which is uniquely feminine in nature. One of the main concerns of this strand of feminism is to establish a ‘woman’s language’ that will resist being appropriated into “phallogocentric” language, to borrow Lacan’s term. The issue of women’s subjectivity and language are a major concern of the French Feminists of the *Psyché Po* group with their academic training in linguistics and psychoanalysis. Their discourse is rooted in the body as they begin by rejecting Freud’s notion of female sexuality as deformity, lack, absence, penis envy, castration anxiety, and hysteria as faulty conjectures. Helene Cixous explains her notion of *écriture feminine*/ woman’s writing as one in which women cease to write like men and write through their own bodies instead, talk about exclusively feminine experiences, voice the woman’s perspective, have the courage to express their desires. Irigaray also speaks of mimicry, “*parler-femme*”/“speaking (as) woman” as a kind of subversive writing. The implication for Irigaray, as for Cixous, is that a woman’s libido is not only repressed but essentially different from a man’s. That difference gives rise to a different language. A major challenge before the second wave feminists was to challenge the established literary canon which consisted of predominantly male, white writers. This desire to have an exclusively women’s tradition of literature establishing the creative potential of “the female imagination” (Showalter 12) stems from this need and necessity to overthrow the dominant literary canon.

Woman’s Language and Man’s Language

But the belief in a ‘woman’s language’ is predicated on the faulty assumption that there is a man’s language, that language is a static structure/system controlled/designed by men, that language is “man-made”, to borrow Dale Spender’s term, a male plot against women in order to ensure the continuation of sexual hierarchy through/in the basic medium of the signifying process, that is, language. This critique of language fails to take into account that the meaning produced as a result of the process of signification is dependent on the context and is open to various interpretations. The very fact that feminists have managed to fight back, make people uncomfortable using the generic he/man/spokesman/chairman, coin gender neutral terms like chairperson/spokesperson – surely proves that even though the use of language can be sexist, language itself is a neutral domain – appropriable, changeable through struggle.

In “Women’s Time,” Kristeva critiques the separatist impulse of the second generation feminists wherein they do not want to be inserted in the dominant patriarchal symbolic order which they feel is oppressive, frustrating and operates on a sacrificial logic. They refuse power in this order and instead establish a counter power, a parallel society which extends in scope from a purely intellectual engagement with ideas to the formation of groups of terrorist commandos aiming at the destruction of the perpetrators of sexual oppression. This counter society is imagined as “harmonious, without prohibitions, free and fulfilling . . . an a-topia, a place outside the law, utopia’s floodgate” (Kristeva 202). The establishment of such a counter society is predicated, first, on the identification of a scapegoat and second, on the expulsion of this evil/foreign element. She enquires, “Does not feminism become a kind of inverted sexism when this logic is followed to its conclusion” (202)? Don’t they start replicating what they were out to dismantle/disrupt/challenge in the first place? They merely re-produce the oppressive logics and strategies of an order which they began to condemn.

According to Kristeva, “when the subject is too brutally excluded from this socio-symbolic stratum . . . too brutally ignored by existing discourse or power (from her family or social institutions); she may, by counter-investing the violence she has endured, make of herself a possessed agent of this violence in order to combat what was experienced” (203). This terrorist violence offers itself as “a programme of liberation” (203). It is directed not against totalitarian regimes but against liberal democracies—a system which is open to resolution through dialogue. By its very definition, terrorism is anti-dialogue and by the same logic, counter productive. It ends up alienating the very group it is fighting for, from the rest of the society. Since a democratic system is completely intolerant of terrorist means of negotiating issues, it adopts even stricter means to suppress/control it. This approach also demands a greater sacrifice from its member/adherents. The followers of this approach have to negate/efface themselves completely, annihilate their desires/aspirations totally in order to devote themselves to such a demanding ‘cause’. Terrorists always tend to attack the weakest part of the state. Rather than sensitizing the system, they end up making the system absolutely hostile to themselves. Sympathy gets generated for the system rather than the terrorists who are no longer seen as wronged/weak but as a counter power.

Further, Kristeva argues that such counter groups take recourse to a belief in an essential past/category; there is a tendency to equate the ‘good substance’ with the myth of the archaic mother (the pre-oedipal, pre-language, pure, essence), belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, fulfilled, complete, all encompassing mother which is seen as the promised

land of deliverance, of absolute liberty, a pristine and pure problem free zone. But this is not so simplistic. This myth of the archaic mother—good and pure substance, a utopia—is a “phantasm”. Kristeva espouses Lacan’s anti-essentialism evident in his scandalous and much used/abused statement: “There is no such thing as Woman”, when she notes “Indeed, she does not exist with a capital ‘W’, possessor of some mythical unity—a supreme power” (205). Kristeva criticizes such a monolithic conception of ‘Woman’ which is bound to sink into an essentialist cult of being such. A major limitation of this approach, she opines is that actual women, in their uniqueness, specificity, individuality and particularity are lost under the monolith of the category ‘Woman’; it is a myth that erases differences and individuality. It also reduces women to an unchanging, universal, a-historic entity that exists prior to the social, cultural, economic, political relations that produce it in the first place. Third world feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty rebel against such homogenization, generalization, blurring of differences/particularities, erasure of contextual details to enable a localized analysis and the resultant stereotyping, discursive colonization at the hands of their western counterparts. Another and bigger danger, Kristeva states is that this contrast between the mythic mother and the socio-symbolic order has been used to justify violence against the system. Mobilization of resources in order to perpetrate violence against the other takes place in the name of this essence and one has to challenge this almost ‘religious’ and uncritically romanticized belief in the archetypal woman in order to diffuse the violence let loose using this as a tool. Kristeva outlines and advocates a Third wave/attitude: move beyond binaries, understand that identity itself consists of multiple identities, focus on more fundamental differences within this identity rather than analyzing superficial differences which can be articulated in terms of binary oppositions, become “self analytical” through “active research” and interiorize “the founding separation of the symbolic contract”.

Kristeva’s critique of separatist feminism and her notion of moving beyond binaries sounds promising but her suggestion of the interioration/internalization of differences is highly problematic. The moment one internalizes these differences, one also naturalizes them, thereby becoming complicit in producing and re-producing them. What I intend to propose instead is a fourth attitude, where one focuses not only on difference between the two sexes but also on the complementarity between them, to understand the constructedness of gender as a category, to acknowledge the essential fluidity of gender, to comprehend the spectrum that gender represents. Narrow identitarian politics is predicated on an investment in the discourse of fragmentation that benefits the oppressive logic of the system. While politics organized around difference and identity may continue to be relevant and efficacious, it is equally imperative to be able to form

solidarities across differential identities against common oppressors in an increasingly globalized world where oppression itself has attained a global character.

Further, to critique is not enough, one should be able to suggest alternatives. So instead of simply focusing on internal differences, as suggested by Kristeva, an ethical politics could involve what Alain Badiou calls “an indifference to differences”, truly overcoming differences as unnecessary hurdles to the formation of complete, wholesome units. This is not to suggest that differences are not important but that focusing on the complementarity between the two sides of the binary is as important as studying the differences between them if one intends to move beyond them in a meaningful way. The two sides of the binary do not share an antagonistic relationship; they share a complementary one as well, which gets ignored in the politics of differences with its promise of liberation. Individuals across the gender spectrum can come together against patriarchy that oppresses all.

The Fourth attitude:

The objective is not to posit the fourth attitude as ‘the only attitude’ and or claim universal validity for the same as truth/reality is different for different people. Indeed, history is full of violence perpetrated against ‘the other’ but excluding ‘the norm’ will only result in making it even more irresponsible towards ‘the other’. Including ‘the norm’ and thereby holding it accountable for such acts of violence is a more balanced approach.

The fourth attitude would also be more inclusive in terms of acknowledging the problematic of gender beyond the feminine. It would also include an engagement with transgender issues, gays and lesbian rights and even transsexual issues. The proliferation of discourses around the infinitely complex matrix of categories such as race, class, nationality, religion, caste, sexuality and gender has rendered it effectively impossible to speak of a ‘feminist project’ in the singular and in isolation.

Conclusion:

Gender concerns are not obsolete or unimportant but class, race, ethnicity etc. are as important as gender, individuals are as important as the group. It is not a position of for/or against feminism but being critical of the strand of feminism which posits ‘Woman’ as the transcendental signifier, pure essence, truth, universal entity, representative of all women, the archetypal mother, an almost religious / uncritical / romanticized belief in a Woman’s tradition, Woman’s language / literature, though acknowledging the historical necessity of such a position. In that particular context, the second attitude was completely justifiable and even liberating but now there is a need to reformulate,

reorient, redefine feminism or any 'ism' for that matter. If feminism has to continue to be relevant, it should become all encompassing, take cognizance of the fact that race, caste, ethnicity, class and other categories around which identity could be defined are as important as gender. The point is not to suggest that feminists today are not doing so already, but to emphasize the need to continue doing so and also the need to broaden the frontiers of feminist discourse to include other 'minor' categories as well.

What is being critiqued here is that strand of thought which posits Man in opposition to Woman and castigates this entity as oppressors, exploiters of women since time immemorial and therefore justifies an attempt to exclude Man from utopia, advocating an exclusionist approach, which, if executed to its logical end, has the potential of appropriating terror as a means to achieve its ends, in the garb of deliverance. Woman or even Man for that matter does not exist—both are constructs, abstractions, ideas that lead to much conflict. Men are equally 'constructed' and entrapped in stereotypes as women. The politics of representation is not simply a static structure but a profoundly dynamic process, in which, feminists, too necessarily participate.

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