



Issues in postcolonial feminist criticism

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Postcolonial feminist theory's project can be described as one of interrupting the discourses of postcolonial theory and of liberal Western feminism, while simultaneously refusing the singular "Third World Woman" as the object of study.¹

Rosemary Marangoly George

Like all forms of postcolonial theory, postcolonial feminist theory has also focused on developing a critique of the colonial discourses and the colonial production of knowledge. Its emphasis has been on developing this critique from a gendered perspective. It would not be wrong to describe postcolonial theory as an attempt to examine the discursive practices of the colonial period using the framework of the complicity of knowledge with power which was developed by Michel Foucault. In fact, postcolonial theory has taken away the earlier focus from the historical and material basis of colonialism. This has happened because of the new perspective on the nature of power in modern societies developed by Foucault and in a different Marxist context by Antonio Gramsci. The use of the insights of these two thinkers has led to a "culturalist interpretation" of colonialism. Expectedly, postcolonial feminist theory has also prioritised cultural and discursive issues. As Rosemary George points out in her essay 'Feminists Theorise Colonial/.Post-Colonial'

¹ See 'Feminists Theorise Colonial/Postcolonial' by Rosemary George in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed Ellen Rooney. P 211.



“... postcolonial feminists scrutinized the gendered blind spots of the mostly masculinist postcolonial critique of relations of power in colonial contexts and newly independent states.

Thus postcolonial feminist scholarship has as its characteristic markings: the fashioning of cautionary signposts, the disclosure of absences, an insistence on what cannot be represented in elite texts, an emphasis on the more than “purely literary,” and the persistent embedding of gendered difference in a larger understanding of race, nationality, class, and caste.” (p 211)

The Saidian perspective as presented in *Orientalism* had analysed the colonial regime as deriving its power from the strategic alterations in the governing discourses of the colonial society. According to it, colonial discourses had created a set of binaries which were useful in subjugating the colonial subjects both politically and epistemologically. However, in Said himself and other post-colonial thinkers who had elaborated the Saidian framework, not much effort was made to bring in the issue of gender. Colonial subjectivity was seen as though it is gender neutral. Both men and women of colonial societies were seen as going through the same processes of subjugation and disciplining. This was untenable on two counts. First, it ignored the gender inequalities which were strongly entrenched in the native societies long before colonialism began to make its impact. Therefore, colonial discourses had to operate on an already existing hierarchy of patriarchal discourses. In most cases, it is this already existing hierarchies which were reinforced and re-inscribed by the colonial discourses. As such, any critique of colonialism which ignores gender hierarchies in the pre-colonial societies fails to provide adequate description of the subjectivity constructed by colonialism.

The other is the complicity or ‘fit’ between the native patriarchal discourses and the imperial/colonial discourses. As it has been analysed in detail by Ashis Nandy and others the



colonial discourses are also constructed around a masculinist patriarchal core. Imperial power is considered as parallel to manliness and just as patriarchy operates by constructing the woman as the other, who needs to be subjugated and disciplined, imperial discourses also construct the colonial subjects as the other in need of being subjugated and disciplined. In fact, there are critics who have argued that imperialism led to hyper masculinist notions in the home countries themselves. For example, the consolidation of the Indian Empire was supported by the reification of patriarchy in British society. The attitudes and behaviour of the British males who constituted the colonial bureaucracy in India were strongly patriarchal. Imperial rule was nothing but a masked assertion of British masculinity. In this context, we can also remember the incisive analysis offered by George Orwell in his essays on colonialism. He argues that it is the anxieties of masculinity which led the colonial officers to adopt the tough mask of a 'pukka sahib'. It is natural that postcolonial feminism should have fore-grounded these issues. It tries to offer the analysis of colonial power as related to patriarchy. It draws parallels between patriarchal subjugation of women and the imperial subjugation of the colonised subjects. It also sees a parallel between the double bind of the coloured women and the women of the colonised societies. Just as the women of colour were doubly oppressed by race and patriarchy, women in colonised societies were also doubly oppressed by patriarchy and imperialism.

The other related issue is the manner in which native patriarchy reacted to the colonial modernity. Colonial modernity was seen as an intervention made by the colonial regime on native religious and cultural traditions. Interestingly, woman was made the trial ground for all the debates on modernity. For example, colonial discourses which attempted to depict native religious and cultural traditions as primitive and backward, took up the lowly status of Indian women as the evidence for such backwardness. Issues such as lack of education among Indian women, 'barbaric



practices' such as Sati and prohibition of widow remarriage were all taken as examples of the inherent backwardness of the colonial society. While, this was used to legitimise proselytising by the Christian missionaries the colonial regime itself used it to legitimise its presence in the colonies. Postcolonial feminist theory has made this its central preoccupation. The writings of Gayatri Spivak and Lata Mani on the system of Sati are examples of such a preoccupation. Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" introduced a large number of related thematic for postcolonial feminist theory. One was the manner in which both the colonial arguments against Sati and the native arguments supporting it totally marginalised the woman's perspective. While colonial discourses tried to project the enlightened progressive liberal west represented the colonial regime as the saviour of Indian women from Indian religious customs, native male discourses looked at the initiatives of the British colonial government as an interference with the ancient Indian traditions. As Spivak summed it up succinctly the entire debate on Sati became a question of "white men trying to save brown women from brown men".

As Rosemary George puts it, "Spivak points to what will become a major preoccupation of postcolonial feminist writing: namely, if and how disenfranchised women can represent, speak, and act for themselves, despite oppressive conditions. Postcolonial feminism unflinchingly acknowledges that there are many obstacles in the path of securing such "voice-consciousness." Yet, despite the odds, postcolonial feminist discourse strives to create the space for this "countersentence" to be spoken by the "gendered subaltern." (p. 216)

Spivak also points out in her essay the way in which colonialism 'invented' the Indian tradition by selectively hegemonising the Vedic, Upanishadic and Shastric traditions. This had a negative consequence for women because compared to most of the non-Vedic traditions the Brahminical traditions had no space for women at all. The collaboration of the colonial administrators and the



Orientalists and the upper caste Brahminical native elite led to a total rewriting of the Indian traditions. The consequence was the agency and limited autonomy which women had in some of the non-Brahminical classes and traditions were marginalised. The classic example is the installation of Manu Smriti as the core Indian/Hindu Shastric text containing all the relevant societal codes. Postcolonial feminist scholars have analysed how this collaboration of the three forces led to increased subjugation of Indian women. In recent years, postcolonial feminist theory has focused its attention on the manner in which the native elite groups reinforced gender hierarchies by indirectly collaborating with an equally patriarchal imperial regime.

Another related issue is the manner in which the colonial regime created a legal system purportedly as an enlightened and progressive system which would succeed in removing all the anomalies of the native systems of justice. However, in its refusal to ruffle the native sentiments the colonial regime refused to address gender based issues of justice. For example, real issues pertaining to women such as share in the family property were left to traditional religious interpretations. One can also remember the long and protracted debates over the age of consent for marriage.

The other issue is the nature of the subjectivity of the female colonial subjects. This had remained practically unaddressed by the native social reformers as well as the leaders of the freedom movement. Though the Indian freedom movement created some sort of public space and participation for women it was not especially sensitive to the question of the interiority of women.

Women were treated either as passive victims who had to be emancipated either by enlightened colonial masters or by the enlightened native elite males. Or they were seen as fit objects for men to exercise their sense of justice and equality by introducing reforms in the native traditions. In neither case was an attempt made to understand the agency of women in such substantial matters relating to their own existence. Similarly, neither the colonial discourses nor the native reforms



discourses paid any attention to the various forms of resistance by women. It is only with the efforts made by postcolonial feminist theory that the instances of resistance by women have been explored.

Another aspect of postcolonial feminist theory has been the interrogation of historiographies – both imperial and nationalist. Though it is the scholars of the sub-altern studies group who made this issue their central concern, feminist scholars were able to recognise the fact that women also constituted a sub-altern class. They understood that the existing historiographic models also carried gender bias in them. For example the argument of the sub-altern group was that the history of the freedom struggle in India had been written exclusively from the perspective of the native elite and had not taken any cognizance of the continuous insurrection by the sub-altern classes. Feminist scholars extended this argument to say that the nationalist historiographies had also marginalised women’s presence and participation in the making of the nation. Taking a cue from Partha Chatterjee’s seminal essay “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” postcolonial feminist scholars have been analysing how the women’s question was ‘resolved’ by nationalism. In fact, one of the major issues of postcolonial feminist theory has been the interrogation of nationalism as another mode of subjugation of women. The close affiliation of nationalism with communal discourses and with hyper-masculinist attitudes has been the subject of scrutiny by postcolonial feminist critics. They have also paid great attention to the nature and the role played by popular culture in the dissemination of the discourses of the nation and how this has also been an oppressive category.

One other issue to be understood is the criticality of location in postcolonial feminist criticism. As Rosemary George points out, “while postcolonial feminist criticism places itself in opposition to all that is mainstream in the literary establishment of the West, when viewed from the non-Western



world, US and British-based postcolonial feminist critical theory is readily associated with other Western feminisms and postmodernisms.” Postcolonial feminist theorists now pay scrupulous attention to the ‘politics of location’ and also to the proximity and relation to power. The focus on location becomes important because a clear awareness prevents assumptions on ‘universality of one’s position’.