



Un-layering the Multiple Layers: An Examination of the Intersection between Feminism and Post Colonialism.

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the intersection between Post colonialism and feminism by looking at the representation of women, who have always been at the receiving end, in once- colonized countries and in Western settings. Few critics concentrate on the issue of gender difference during the colonial epoch, both in colonial and anti colonial discourses; while others contemplate the illustration of women in Postcolonial discourses, keeping in focus the works of these women writers, where the 'representation of gender 'is at the centre of all the discussion.

Works of Indian feminist critic like Gayatri spivak together with the works of Canadian writer, Margarate Atwood have been used to illustrate the shared aims of these writers and those who write keeping in mind the equivalent objective.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century the British Empire had covered a vast area of the world including the parts of Asia, Africa, and Caribbean Island. The oppressed countries have witnessed the rule of oppressors for an incredibly extensive period. Colonial rule can be understood as the settlement of a particular group of people in a new locale where they can rule over the natives and use the resources of that place for their own benefit. The colonial practice involves ascendancy over other subjugated population. The oppressors believed that their rule over others was justifiable and made the oppressed acknowledge their subordinate status in the colonial order, a practice also known as 'Colonization of the mind'. The term Post colonialism, however deals with the issues of cultural identity in colonized societies, the quandary of developing a national identity following colonized rule. In literature the writers deal with the ways to articulate and commemorate the newly formed identities. Post colonial theory also brings out the ways in which the awareness of

the subaltern has been engendered and used to serve the colonizer's welfare. The post colonial literature illustrates a variety of ways in which colonizer's literature has justified colonialism through images of colonized as a perpetually substandard society and ethnicity.

The creation of binary opposition structures the way we view 'others'. In the case of colonialism, the 'Oriental' and 'Westerner' were distinguished as different from one another. Although a number of reviewers view the concept of colonialism and post colonialism as instruments of hybridity and diffusion of various cultures. Post colonial theory addresses matters of identity, gender, race, and customs with the challenges of post-colonial national identity, of how colonized people's knowledge was used against them, while they served colonizers' interests and their problematic relationship that was built between the powerful and the powerless. The term post colonial can be related to both, historical continuity and change.



The idea of post colonialism, to some critics, has appeared as a ‘male-centered phenomenon’. The same idea is supported when one asserts that the concept of colonialism is equivalent to the idea of patriarchy. However, the terminology is debatable, where defining the idea of patriarchy is as tricky as summarizing the colonial concept in a single sentence. Although, the term ‘patriarchy’ can be understood as a reference to the structure that devotes supremacy to men and completely marginalizes the women of the society. Akin to colonialism, patriarchy stresses definite representational systems that results in generating an order of the world accessible to individuals as ‘true’. Like colonialism, patriarchy exists in the midst of resistances to its authority, where the goal remains challenging the forms of oppression. Along with feminism the notions of ‘First world’ feminism and ‘Third world’ women are needed to be discussed briefly. The former consists of largely the rich, western nations like America, Europe whereas the ‘Third world’ incorporates the colonized regions such as Africa and South Asia, the countries which were economically underdeveloped and depended entirely upon the affluent nations for their monetary fortunes.

Now we shall trace a variety of patriarchal authority to which women from colonized world may be subjected in order to address the concept of ‘double colonialism’. Like the colonizers dominated the colonized countries, the women too were dominated, and still are being oppressed by men over centuries and their condition was even more intricate. Anna Rutherford and Kristen Holst Peterson have used the expression ‘double colonization’ to refer the ways in which women have concurrently experienced the coercion of colonialism and patriarchy. Both these critics further argue in the Foreword of *A Double*

Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women’s Writing, that “colonialism celebrates male achievement in a series of male oriented myths such as ‘mate ship, the Mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bushrangers, missionaries’”(Page 9) whereas women become representative of the patriarchal values. Hence, the term ‘double colonialisation’ depicts the fact that women face oppression on two levels, comprehensively, by the males and on the other hand by the colonialists. It forces women to submit to two authoritative figures at the same time. One can notice the hypocrisy in handling the portrayal of Eastern and Western women, where the former is associated with eroticism and the latter represents superior ethics and civil principles. In her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient*, Rana Kabbani gives an idea about how the Eastern women in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were objectified as exotic creatures that personified as well as guaranteed the implicit excessive sexual amusement of the orient. Another renowned critic, Mary Louise in *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and Transculture*, marks in her work the western women’s liaison with the binary mechanism of colonialism and patriarchy is often convoluted as they can be positioned in opposing positions; empowered as a unit of the ‘civilized’ colonizing nation yet disempowered beneath western patriarchal inscription. In her essay, *White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood*, Hazel Carby marks that “indigenous gender roles could be more equitable than the sexist and chauvinist gender stereotypes and social roles brought from colonizing culture” (Beginning post colonialism by John McLeod :177). An interesting detail mentioned by Ketu H. Katrak in ‘Indian Nationalism’ is, he claims that ‘Gendered representation’ or rather duplicity was evident in Mahatma Gandhi’s resistance to British



imperial rule in India. According to Katrak, Gandhi appropriated figures of inactive women to endorse his movement of 'Passive resistance' to British colonial rule. Both men and women were supported to implement a compliance solely allied with femininity, merely for the intention of flouting the colonial power and not patriarchal power. Kartak further states that Gandhi's political stratagem for nationwide liberation did not inquire patriarchal traditions that subjugated women inside the home. Moreover, Gandhi's exercise of symbols with which he connects women reasonably incarnates domesticity, matrimony, wifehood. Hence, Kartak's assessment to colonial resistance stands right in stating that colonialism abides to the traces of asymmetrical gender affairs. A similar concern has been put forth by Carole Boyce Davie who is apprehensive about the male centeredness of the postcolonial concept and asks about the presence and participation of women in the post colonial theory. Davies suggests postcolonial critics to stay sensitive to the subject of gender dissimilarity in their works, where women get sufficient liberty to depict their outlook and not just remain unvoiced.

Another very intense angle in the area of Feminism is the impact of 'racial' identity amongst numerous feminists, drawing us closer to inquire the involvement of black women writers in the field of feminism. Hazel Carby in her essay, *'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood'*, talks about the idea of 'Western feminism' and points out that Asian and Black women nearly had undetectable and problematic presence within the discourse. A great amount of criticism has been given to western feminism for associating the oriental culture as uncivilized and rough-edged and for disregarding these women along with their culture. The 'feminist' version of this ideology presents Asian

women as being in need of liberation, not in terms of their own 'her story' and needs, but into the 'progressive' social mores and customs of the metropolitan West. The actual struggles that Asian women are involved in are ignored in favors of applying theories from the point of view of a more 'advanced', more 'progressive' outside observer ('White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood'; p.216). This is what Carby calls 'ethnocentric' prejudice, where white women have failed to perceive black and Asian women as their equals. Carby concludes her argument by suggesting that Western women writers need to embrace 'Oriental' writers with utmost deference and should bend their stance for the communal betterment and enlargement of the entire gender vis a vis race. The probability of constructing a novel and transformative relations among women across 'First' and 'Third World' feminism is apparent in a Susheila Nasta's book titled *'Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia (1991)'* in which she argues that a 'creative dialogue' is viable where 'First world' women and 'third world' voices mutually contribute to and learn from each other.

The above concerns are also discussed by Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak in *'Can the subaltern speak?'* In the essay she critiques the demonstration of human subjectivity in a variety of perspectives with particular reference to the work of subaltern studies scholars. She asserts that much like 'Third World' Women, 'Subaltern consciousness' is too an outcome of western discourse. Spivak's voice is a disquieting voice in literary hypothesis and postcolonial studies in particular. She has described herself as a "practical deconstructionist feminist Marxist" and as a social "gadfly". In her essay, she merges fervent criticism of the impairment done to women, non-Europeans,



and the poor and struggles to provide the hushed with a say. The discussion intensifies when the question of gender come into focus, as soon as one realizes that the representations of subaltern uprising tend to prioritize men.”As objects of colonialists’ historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as females is even more deeply in shadow” (“Can the subaltern speak’p.82). Thus, throwing light on the state of women, confined in shadows of colonialism and patriarchy. The conclusion comes out that no ‘original’ voice of women can be heard, even after the act of retrieval to history, “as Spivak identifies” writes Robert Young in ‘*White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*’, ”not that the women cannot speak as such, that no records of the subject –consciousness of women exist, but that she is assigned no position of enunciation [and therefore] everyone else speaks for her, so that she is rewritten continuously as the object of patriarchy or of imperialism”. Spivak further provides example of *sati*, the Hindu practice of burning a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, to look at the silenced subaltern women in colonial India. She wraps up her essay by stating that it is better to look at the representational systems which rendered women mute, than to make the subaltern female to speak, alleging the silence of the females as subaltern as the outcome of *interpretation* and not articulation.

Like Spivak, Margaret Atwood is another writer in whose works feminism is a persistent theme, explored through the perspective of the female (narrator) protagonists. Atwood’s novels focus on question of identity from a postcolonial perspective. Her protagonists suffer from oppression by patriarchy as well as cultural

imperialism, in other words, ‘Double oppression’ of women. The oppression is the physical oppression to Canada (Atwood’s homeland) and psychological oppression upon the frail where, a woman’s body is colonized by men and her psychology is wronged by the society. Atwood’s writings deal with the issue of equality for women as she is seen raising her voice against the physical and mental violence committed against women. In her texts one can notice the amalgamation of her identity, that is, her colonized identity as a Canadian and her identity as a woman is placed side by side at diverse levels to make the readers aware of the degree of oppression that a ‘Colonized Woman’ undergoes. Clearly she brings out the correlation between Feminism and Post colonialism.

Feminism and Post colonialism are classified as economic, political, social terms combating rule-colonial as well as patriarchal rule and inequality. Atwood’s *The Edible woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) depict how women are ruled over and silenced, akin to colonized countries and their endeavors for fortitude and autonomy. She looks at colonial and patriarchal decree as similar domination that results in causing depression and descends at individual and societal levels respectively. Atwood deduces that equality and liberation can only be achieved when the entire society works in order to attain freedom from every kind of disproportion, irrespective of race, gender or class. Her writings evidently depict the importance of involvement of women. Through her works she tries to portray that Canada cannot get independence in true sense as long as it keeps women at distance.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood’s protagonist and other women characters are not only under the oppression of men but also they lack opportunities



to develop at individual level and therefore remain incapable of setting up standards for themselves. Men occupy an imperative role in their lives; they become the mediators for their liberation. Here, one can notice that Atwood places oppressing men equivalent to oppressing Colonizers. The women or the colonized, in the novel, struggle to fight against the patriarchal, matriarchal and colonial subjugation respectively. The oppressor surmounts the land (also associated with female body) by applying force over the weak. For instance, in *The Edible woman*, the woman's body suffers and is violated repeatedly. Kudchadkar, an ardent reader of Atwood, alleges that Atwood's women suffer from personal victimization which is deep rooted in colonial pattern of oppression and obliteration. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Protagonist is a victim of colonialism and through resisting she thrives to survive, she resists both p/matriarchal and societal imperial traditions. But soon she realizes that in a male oriented society, it is difficult for her to survive alone. She in a way becomes the representative of the entire Canadian clan. In *The Edible woman*, the women submit to the rules of patriarchy with much ease and are content with their inferior status as sisters, wives and mothers. The agenda of young girls is to hunt for a suitable match and believe that their survival is solely based on their submission. The same degree of dependence on men is evident in Marian's response to her future husband; when he puts forth the question of marriage, Marian meekly replies: "I'd rather leave big questions on you". Indicating, marriage is also seen as a medium of existence and protection solely of women.

The above discussed characters are neither content with their situation nor do they demonstrate audacity to revolt against the disparity and injustice. They perform their womanly obligations but at the same time look for

accomplishment over societal standards. Coral Howell discusses that the motive of Atwood's fiction is to make women critically conscious of their stereotypical roles. She tries to induce the readers to find answers in solidarity and not in solitude. Atwood does not romanticize women but on the contrary, these characters lucratively emulate the realities of the social order. This is most visible in the way she ends her novels –with a tinge of distrust and loss. Truly she depicts agony of women but at the same time provides potential remedy and facilitates them to enlighten themselves and emancipate their principles.

Thus, the need to break the historical and cultural shackles is imperative in order to deconstruct the image of ever subjugated, maltreated and silenced men and women. The ray of equality can break through into the densely bleak world of inequality when the powers and facilities will be equally distributed amongst the citizens of a society and questions about their surroundings and sexual category will not raise the brows of others.

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