



AN EXPLORATION OF NEW PERSPECTIVES IN FRENCH
FEMINISM

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Abstract

The present research paper sheds light on and deliberates the new perspectives offered by French feminists such as Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Christine Delphy, Monique Wittigs, and Colette Guillaumin. The French feminists gave a new theoretical orientation and direction to feminist movement in twentieth century by providing new insights. Their work is based on the new developments and theoretical perspectives of post structural thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Foucault and Louis Althusser. The female body is at the centre in the writing of French feminists. Language is also a main concern in their works. The new discoveries and theories in psychoanalysis largely influenced and shaped their works. Their main contention is that the man and the women experience the world quite differently and women need a different style of writing and a new language to express their perceptions of the world. Ecriture feminine is one the major contribution of French feminists.

Key words: *Post structural theories, ecriture feminine, essentialism, language, psychoanalysis, French feminism, phallogocentric, Feminist movement*

The term feminism has wide spread implications which has social, political, economic, literary and philosophical dimensions. Some scholars feel that feminism concerns with every sphere of life that touches women's lives. Feminism has developed rapidly in nineteenth and twentieth century all over the world, but still it is evolving and growing rapidly with each passing day encompassing knowledge and discoveries from other discipline of knowledge. As the movement of feminism developed further and further, its scope got widened encompassing various concern that touched women's lives. At the initial stage it was a movement that fought for women's rights, women's equality and independence. In the beginning it was known as women liberation movement which sought equal rights for women at par with men. In the initial stages very few women were vocal for their right, but this scenario changed with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal book *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The

book laid down the theoretical foundation for the feminism and gives an impetus to the women's rights movement. Many women came forward, became vocal, talked about and discussed their rights. Another important figure in the early development of feminism is John Stuart Mill. His book *The Subjection of Women* published in 1869 is also considered as one of the foundational books of feminism. When the book was published in 1869, women do not have any legal rights. They are subjugated in everywhere in the world. J.S. Mill advocated for complete equality for women in all spheres of life be it social, economic, political or cultural.

The development of feminism is generally described in terms of waves or phases. We are now in the fourth wave of feminism out of four waves considered by the feminist and scholars. This classification of feminism in phases acquires significance because each of these waves achieved some specific goals for women. The main focus of first wave of feminism was to get equal rights for

women in all spheres of life irrespective of cast, creed or race of the woman. As stated earlier women didn't have any economic, political or legal rights nor were they allowed to take any profession. Their world was limited to the four walls of the house. The highlight of the first wave of feminism is the women suffrage movement in the many parts of the world. As a result of women suffrage movement, women got Right to Vote in many parts of the world. The second wave of feminism began after the Second World War and the focal point of this wave was to put an end to discrimination against women in all fields of life. One of the seminal books published in second wave was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The book talked about socialisation of women and how they are assigned gender specific roles. She said that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. The third wave of feminism began in 1980.

The scope of this wave was very wide compared to previous two waves. As mentioned above the feminism gradually became an international movement as it incorporated various diverse fields and disciplines. There were various schools of feminism based on concerns, interests, race, sexuality and nationality. There is British feminism, Anglo-American feminism, black feminism, lesbian feminism and French feminism. As discussed earlier the first to phase of feminism sought equal rights for women in all the spheres of life, but later on there arose various groups within feminism such as Black feminism, lesbian feminism based on sexual inclination, theoretical perspective etc. We find that these different schools and sub groups within feminism tried to put forward their theories and concepts of female/ feminine nature. As a result the feminism became more theoretical and intellectual.

Alice Jardine used the term French feminism in 1982. The term French feminist is used for three French feminist Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva in the beginning, but later on it included other French women theorists such as Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig, Colette Guillaumin

and many others. These French feminist were largely influenced by the postmodern writing, post structural theories and new discoveries in anthropology, psychoanalysis and linguistics. They also extensively used this new finding and discovery of postmodernist and post structural scholars and thinkers in their writings. Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* elucidates the concerns of French feminists in contrast to Anglo-American theorists in following words.

In contrast to the Americans the work of French feminists is more overtly theoretical, taking at its starting point the insights of major poststructuralists, especially Lacan, Foucault and Derrida Indeed the French theorists often deal with concerns other than literature: they write about language, representation and psychology as such(Barry, 125)

They gave a new direction to the feminism with a solid theoretical framework. The term French feminism is not used to denote nationality; rather the term is used to denote a group of thinkers who share some common theoretical concerns. One more common trait among these scholars is that they all wrote in French language. They also largely used and interpreted and reinterpreted the theories of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. As we know the feminist in second wave of feminism fought for equal rights for women. They reexamined the gender roles and socialization of women and social institutions from the perspective of women.

They wanted to create a less misogynistic society. Contrary to the activism of the feminists in the first wave, the works of the French feminists are more philosophical and intellectual in nature. As result we find extensive use of post structural theory in the work of French feminist, particularly the post structural theories of language and psychoanalysis play an important role in the French feminism. Their work is based in linguistic constructionism where in language create subjects and ideas. Language interrogate the subjects and

asks them to take a position in the society. Their work is also founded on essentialism. The French feminist have also used Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist theories and post psychoanalysis theories and psycholinguistic theories.

The French feminist lay emphasis on psychology and primarily use theories of psychoanalysis for the analysis of literature. They believed that the structure of language is primarily patriarchal. As we all know Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's theories of psychoanalysis are based on language. So in the French feminism psychology and language merge in each other. French feminists believe that patriarchal language is used to portray woman as a symbol in a semiotic system. This aspect shows that language itself is sexist. Another implication of sexist language is that Western literary theory and criticism tends to be phallogocentric which gives more importance to the male writing and tends to neglect and relegate women's writing in background. French feminist try to subvert phallogocentrism in western literary theory and criticism. They try to break conventional male stereotypes of sexual difference. Their study of language as male centred and phallogocentric is very important because language is used to construct and disseminate such stereotypes. They want to subvert such construction in language and use language to create a positive image of women in literature. They believe that there is separate women's language and women writer should use this specific women's language. Raman Selden explains the emphasis given by French feminists on language in their works in his book *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* in these words:

French feminist theoreticians in particular, in seeking to break down conventional male constructed stereotypes of sexual differences have focused on language as at once the domain in which such stereotypes are structured , and evidence of the liberating sexual differences which

may be described in a specifically 'women's language;(Selden, 141)

They believe that women's language is characterized by loose, digressive sentences. In patriarchal, phallogocentric language the language itself is used refer to women as a sign in a semiotic system. This concept is developed by feminist and used to explain how women's status is constructed, developed and communicated in the patriarchal society. French feminist critics have also largely used Simone de Beauvoir's concept of 'other'. This concept indicates that women are perceived as other of man. The concept of other is used to indicate binary oppositions in society. In this binary operation of man /woman, man is at the centre and women at the periphery in patriarchal society. The concept tries to inculcate that women are inherently weak and passive. So they are other of man. Simone de Behaviour points out that Western society are totally male dominated and phallogocentric. In this patriarchal society women are considered as second sex, the other. Woman is defined in relation to man and not man in relation to woman. The society considers the man as essential and as central and woman as inessential and secondary.

Ecriture Feminine is a French term generally used for women's writing. This term refers to the style of writing which is considered as unique to women. The term is generally associated with French feminism and more specifically with French feminist critic Helen Cixous. Cixous says that woman writers have always to work on the two levels. One of these levels is literal level while another one is metaphorical level. Women writers and feminist critics have to assume various roles. They sometimes assume defensive masculine roles and other times assume fully feminine roles and sometimes they combine both masculine and feminine roles. The most important principle of *écriture féminine* is that women should write a new female text. Edgar and Sedgwick concisely and lucidly explain the term *écriture féminine* in their book *Cultural Theory: Key Concepts* in following words:

A form of writing and reading that resists being appropriated by the dominant patriarchal culture. It is argued, developing on the psychoanalysis of Lacan, that patriarchal culture privileges a hierarchal way of thinking grounded in a series of oppositions (Edgar & Sedgwick.102-103)

Ecriture feminine appeals the woman to write with female body. Another aspect is that French feminism gives more importance to languages and literature rather than to sociology history or politics. They were keenly interested in the making/formation of psyche/psychology of an individual. They try to find out how a subject is constructed by language and other social institutions.

The main thrust of ecriture feminine is to construct a new style of writing that could better express women's emotions and experience. The women should use a different language specific to their gender and body. The practitioners of ecriture feminine oppose the binary oppositions created by patriarchal society such as male / female, self / other, he / she etc. which tend to relegate women to a secondary position. The language based on these binary oppositions is not a suitable medium for women to express their emotions and experience. This new style of writing and language freed from clutches of patriarchy and binary oppositions will provide a suitable medium for women to express themselves. This new language would create a better self image of women as they are freed from the barriers and disadvantages of language created by men. The women must write about her and her innermost feeling in the feminine text. Helene Cixous insists that Women must write about herself and her body. She emphasizes that women must put her into the text, world and history. Lucy Irigaray compares and makes association between feminine language and female body. She says that one main purpose of feminine language and ecriture feminine is to show that women experience the world differently than men and they need a different language to express their perceptions. She

says that patriarchal society priorities man's experiences by erasing sexual differences. The concept of ecriture feminine focuses on the female body. The French feminist believe that the body is at the root of difference between man and woman.

Conclusions

French feminist gave a new orientation in twentieth century. They also provided a solid theoretical framework to feminist movement by using post structural theories. There emphasis was on women's perceptions of the world and finding a suitable medium of expression exclusively for women. Some of their concepts didn't find favour with other feminists, but there contribution to feminist theory was novel and original.

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