

FEMINIST LITERATURE

PART – 2

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In This episode we shall continue our journey of the history of social movements and ideas and theories which led to emergence of the theory of feminism. We had spoken of the first wave of feminist and the feminists who participated in it in our previous episode. To recapitulate very briefly, there were certain ideas which propagated and provoked the early feminist to take action. Through writing, through physical action and through declaration of sentiments, the idea that the woman is no longer subservient to man was taking shape and this is what feminism is all about. How a woman begins to realise her self, how she begins to know what is due to her, how she begins to be aware that she is no less a than any one else.

Now in this episode, we shall talk about the second wave of feminism and the feminists which were associated with it, also the women writers who contributed a great deal to shape the direction of the feminist movement. You see, the feminist movement has two parts. One is the physical action, like protesting on the streets and the other part is the ideology, which consists of the women's writings. In a way, the two parts complemented and shaped each other. What happened on the streets would be taken up by women writers. It would be debated and discussed. And whatever the outcome of their writings would influence whatever happened on the streets after wards. So it was like complementary process which was taking place all the time.

In the first episode also we discussed certain expressions and ideas which form part of women's writings. One of them was anger. We talked about anger being an unsettling influence on discourse. We talked about the questioning spirit of the new woman. We also talked about the expressions of attitudes and feelings in the writings of women. We are going to continue with all this in this second episode also in our examination of second wave of feminism. Before we go on to America, where the second wave of feminism was at its height in sixties and seventies, we shall take a brief look at a major French writer whose thoughts shaped the generations of feminists.

In France, we have Simone de Beauvoir. In think most of us are familiar with her name and her monumental work, 'The Second Sex'. It was published in 1929 and it went on to become a highly controversial book. It talks about the situation of woman and more specifically it says a woman who is living in a world where men compel her to assume the role of the other. Now this book attempts to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence. Her main thesis is that women have always been considered inferior & it is men who control societal norms, who carve traditions, who create history, who impose this unequal standing, this imbalance upon women. Beauvoir uses science, history, events, situations to analyse the fate of women as determined by their biology and by men. Her account traces the history of women since ancient times till the present. Her documentation of the history of women unearths the fact that the basic factor which is behind women's subjugation, i.e., women have been imagined, moulded, exploited and defined by men. Thus creating a male centric tradition and history. This occurs because of the way nature has fashioned her body. Laws are haphazardly framed, rights are unwillingly conceded. Religion and society half heartedly grant women the position of human beings.

Of course, it helps the patriarchy to keep women subordinate. This is the regressive course of history of women. Now Beauvoir does not seek or she does not attempt to find in this journey, a feminist history. That is not her position. She just is documenting the history of women and how the inferior position of women has come about. There is also no conscious effort to reverse this backward trend of history. Remember, we spoke about divergent directions being available to women, when the new woman came into the scene. They could try and include women's history or they could create a new women's history. But Beauvoir does not to any of these. Her is a documentation of the history of the womenkind. And there is this – situation of the woman through different phases of life i.e., childhood, girlhood, marriage, motherhood etc. are discussed at great length in this book.

Regarding matrimony, Beauvoir views it as a circumstance where a girl is given in marriage by her parents. Where as a boy gets married and takes a wife. Now the use of these verbs, itself indicates the position of women. That, a girl is given as some object as a matter of property. The ownership is handed from the father to the husband. Where as it's the man who is taking everything. He is receiving all these things. He is receiving the possession of the woman. He is also getting her undiluted and undying service to him. So Simone de Beauvoir concludes by agreeing with the contention that marriage diminishes man, which is true. But it always annihilates a woman. So marriage seems to drastically affect women. It effects them more adversely than it effects a man. Simone de Beauvoir also dismisses the preconceptions about motherhood. The first is that maternity is enough to crown a woman's life. This is one of the myths that one holds even today, that maternity is what woman are seeking. Second is that the child is sure that a child is sure of being happy in its mother's arms. Now, she dispenses with these myths. And she says that mother hood should be freely chosen by women it should not be thrust upon them. As you know, as something that makes them happy. And she also rejects the notion that a woman is a natural mother, which is what the society believes. She disagrees with Freud and other psychoanalysts that describe the inferiority of the woman to the castration complex and penis envy. This theory considers the child to have provided the woman with equivalent of the penis. Mothers may be glorified and sanctified. But according to Beauvoir, it is only in marriage that a mother is glorified. That is only when she is subordinated to her husband. So this again reflects the subordinate position of women.

If you remember, I spoke about – that the feminist movement virtually disbanded and ended with the World wars and after the right to vote was granted to them. What happens is that this hiatus or the gap in the political activism of feminism was breached in the American continent. The Feminists again took up the problematic woman's question that we talked about earlier. And the late 1960's and 70's saw the resurgence of woman's against the patriarchal oppression. At this time social and political movements like civil rights crusade, the new left, the counter culture were taking place which laid emphasis on the individual rights. So protests and movements apart, the women's writings also prompted women to re-examine the oppressed conditions and act against it.

According to Baroness Fischer, who is an important critic – she says that three elements were important to the radical feminist of the 1960's and the 70's. The first was a commitment to resistance, which would be a key factor on agitating on the political and the social front ...and also on the intellectual front. And other was the feelings of women which had to be communicated through action or language. And the third factor was the validation of this feeling and strategy by the community of those who were oppressed. By dedicating themselves to these ideal the radicalists hoped to reverse the debilitating trend of history. And they wanted to entrust women with roles as central and important as male character, in the recreation of history. In the hope that they would realise this ideal of equality between the sexes the political activism of the feminist movement exposed certain dialectical tensions in thought and action. There was the problem of assessing resistance.

As the meaning and quantification of resistance differed according to women's actual situations, different women in different situations will be offering resistance in different ways. And how much of the resistance was one offering, that was also something which was not spelt out. Then there was the difficulty in defining authentic feelings. Whose feelings were authentic? Each woman has different kinds of feelings. So which feelings would you consider authentic. Did the community based on love and sisterhood meant adopting a non-violent approach to social differentiations and inequalities? Did it mean that? Or was naming and expressing anger a more effective way of being politically subversive. So these questions arise when you examine the second wave of feminist ideology.

There was also the problem of sharing the basis of anger. Like the women were angry for different reasons. Because it depended on the nature of their oppression. These activists were separated by the race and class privileges. Obviously a woman who belonged to the upper class, would not suffer oppression like a person belonging to the afro-american community would do. So a genesis of this anger would not be due to same experiences. So, how do you say that which feeling or which emotion is authentic and which is not. Then lastly, where the validation of the action and validation of the feeling by the community of the oppressed is concerned, that also posed a difficulty of relating to issues of power and leadership. For example, the afro-americans would question validating the genuineness of the resistance and the leadership of the whites, that is, the white women. As there was a long history of oppression by the latter.

Now, on the other hand there is another side to the coin, that though belonging to the same oppressed black community black woman would oppose validating the resistance of their leaders as they suffered from a double sense of oppression. They suffered as being blacks and also suffered as being women within their own community. So this is the double sense of oppression. These feminists had to address, the question of differences among women as well as start questioning the text handed down from father to son. That is, the dominator's version of the history of mankind. Now, the writings by women writers during this time, they were very provocative and they catalysed the second generation of feminists into further action and development of critical theories. Their concern was to scrutinise the shared canon of literary greats, in order to account for the absence of a significant body of women's writings. This involved the critique of the male literary canon.

Mary Ellman, a famous feminist thinker, she has a book called 'Thinking About Women' published in 1968. It interests itself in women as words and proceeds to demonstrate the all pervasive phenomenon of thought by sexual analogy in western culture. It reveals how not only sexual terms but sexual opinions are imposed upon the external world. Its purpose is to expose the absurdity and illogicality of this kind of thinking. Ellman further emphasises, the use of a style peculiar to women as an instrument of female expression, rather than using the experiences of women. Instead of writing about experiences of women, just writing experiences you should use a style which is particular to a woman.

If you remember, I had referred to Margaret Fuller and her particular style, a conversational mode which could include different voices in it. So Mary Ellman is also probably trying to advocate a similar linguistic strategy in writing. This style could work subversively to disengage the manly style. Of course, the whole idea of writing and using writing as a subversive factor was to disengage the canon of literary greats, or rather male literary greats from its heights and bring it down to the level of the not so privileged other, i.e. the woman.

In 1969, we have Kate Millet, another well known influential feminist writer whose 'Sexual Politics' – this is the name of her book published in 1969 - it attacked the misogyny of the

privileged literature and illustrated this with readings from texts by writers such as D H Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet. Among other factors, she also saw writing as a physical and psychological oppression of women. She also rejects Freud's psychoanalytical theories of penis envy, female narcissism and female masochism as being as a form of biological essentialism i.e., a theory that reduces all behaviour to inborn sexual characteristics. Any thing that a woman may do is blamed to her sex.

Millet writes that the real tragedy of Freudian psychology is that its fallacious interpretations of feminine character were based upon clinical observations of great validity. So in a way she is criticising as well as acknowledging Freud's contribution to the history of mankind. Now the tendency in criticism was to reduce male canonical works to predictable sexual misogyny. And literature was seen as the representative of life and it was also seen as something as a tool which expressed, reflected, oppressive discriminations in all social structures. So literature now becomes a zone of combat. This is the zone of combat between the women writers and the male writers and the road of liberation and survival for the women.

In the mid seventies the critical reappraisal was directed towards finding a female literary tradition as Eliane Showalter tried to discover in her book 'A Literature of Their Own'. So now what is happening is that there is a change in critical thinking. Earlier it was male bashing and now its trying to find a literary past of women. A year earlier than Eliane Showalter, Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks in her book the 'Female Imagination' had explored the perceptions of and the shaping influences on the women writer's imagination and her articulation in writing.

There was change in the tenor of thinking since Shulamith Firestone published 'A Dialectic of Sex' in 1970 and accused biology of limiting a woman's life and being responsible for her subordinate status. As meanings and connotations changed with time, feminism did not remain any longer just an active women's movement protesting against injustice & inequality. It reflected upon writing, analysing and critiquing male dominated social-political-economic as well as literary structures. This kind of intellectual activity gave rise to different kinds of writings, which were critical, ideological, discursive, utopian, angry and polemical in nature. Such writing was invested with qualities of both thought and action. In fact some critics find feminism paradoxical. For example, it calls for sex solidarity for achieving individual freedom. Recognises diversity among women yet it calls women to be united. It is based in gender consciousness, yet it advocates elimination of prescribed gender roles. Now these paradoxes had to be acknowledged by feminism in its analysis of gender construction and the meaning of woman and her womanhood.

As these antithetical stances were rooted in women's actual situation. Feminism had to understand that women were the same as men. i.e., belonging to the same species and yet were different with respect to the reproductive biology. Thus women could locate a natural unity on the basis of their biology. If you carry this argument further. All women can be considered the same in the biological sense and therefore different from men. Yet not the same with respect to the experience of gender construction, which is created along race and class lines. Feminism could then find validation in all kinds of protest movements whether through action or writing by, of or for women.

The change in the nature of the movement increased the urgency amongst feminist to search for a past in order to assert the commonality of women. As well as work towards achieving a new future. We began with trying to find a definition of feminism. So Feminism has been talked about differently, in different ways and I gave you a safe definition or interpretation of the term earlier, saying that it is like a position or stance with deals with the problematic women's question. However other than examining women's question, feminists have taken feminist not to be just an ideology but a way of life.

For Example, let me give you a quotation of Dale Spender, very well known feminist. She says that Feminism is way of life, a value system and a means of explaining the world and my place in it. It is a way also of improving the quality of my life. It is a flexible world view, which is based on a better set of assumptions than any world view. While patriarchy is based on the premise of domination of women by men, of blacks by whites, of poor by rich, of weak by strong, Feminism views human beings as equals who can and should live in a harmony with each other, without violence, without exploitation. So, you can see that there is no one definition of feminism. We all have to evolve or find definitions through the various writings, through the kinds of protest movements took place and which has granted us what we are enjoying today – the privileges of being free women in a free country.

So you can see that it is also very post-modern in its attitude and in its thought because like in post-modernism meta-narratives are broken down into smaller plural narratives and each narrative having an importance in itself. Feminism also tries to break down the unitary patriarchal narrative into smaller narratives of women where in each woman can find her voice. And thus give rise to a plural experience and varied experience. So feminism has a very evolving ethos and it authenticates itself in the writings of women. Who express their feelings, who question inequalities and who fight for the rights of the marginalised and the underprivileged.