

Torn Identity of Women in the Light of Feminist Theories

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Abstract

The question of women empowerment and identity has been in discussion of literary and social discussions since ages. Various feminist theorists have recorded their experiences and the experiences of the women in their surroundings to address all the major and subtle issues faced by women. In the present times, when most of the women work for income, it is important to look at the specific issues they have started facing as working women. This paper tries to look at the same in the light of some of the noted feminist theories of the west and India. Women are yet to achieve the kind of independence they visualise owing to the patriarchy that molds them from time to time.

Keywords: Conflict, Durga, Gender, Patriarchy, Multitasking

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Introduction

This paper discusses various feminist theories from the viewpoint of women's empowerment and the prolonged dilemma of home and the world spaces in women's life. Women have been living in the patriarchal setup for ages. There have been economic developments, political and legal reforms in most of the societies, yet at socio-cultural levels there have been very few changes so far as women's internal conflicts are concerned. This paper is an attempt to analyse the feminist theories across boundaries and temporal restrictions.

The Second Sex

Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a seminal work in the feminist theoretical studies. In Part VII of the book, she discusses what happens to woman when she tries to bridge the gap between 'home and world'. "Once she ceases to be a parasite the system based on her dependence crumbles, between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator." (Beauvoir 689). When an independent woman discontinues her

dependence on the male counterparts, she emerges out as a threat to the family and social structure. It is evident that economic self-reliance makes women pursue their independent life more rigorously and powerfully. Although this is true, the ground reality has something else to offer. Women still suffer numerous problems while balancing the multiple tasks that they perform on daily basis without exemption.

Beauvoir claims that woman multiplies her tasks without anybody making her do so. 'Women have made dressing and housekeeping difficult arts'. Besides 'she has to maintain a more complicated elegance'. Men on contrary do not bother about their clothes. Beauvoir explains, "She wants to retain her womanliness for her own satisfaction." (Beauvoir 693). According to her women are not always forced by society to follow the norms of womanhood. They feel the need to do so from within and hence never give up on the broad image of woman they perceive. Beauvoir says that woman doesn't want to be 'unfaithful to her destiny as woman'. (Beauvoir 703)

The Madwoman in the Attic

One of the most discussed and praised works in the feminist studies is *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. This book takes into account women writers of various countries and analyses their works. They find that all works of these writers establish a kind of female literary tradition. This work elaborately discusses Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte, from whose novel the title of this book is borrowed, and many others. Through the works of the female writers this book shows what the Victorian womanhood was like and how the women had similar situations under the clutches of patriarchy. Further, this book also sees how language of literary creation by men is patriarchal. This book is relevant to the present thesis as it provides literary evidences for the fictional construct of womanhood. The critics have aptly pointed out as to how women strived to maintain the 'angelic' womanhood as against the madwoman. The angelic womanhood is an embodiment of all the desirable and acceptable traits in a woman, whereas, the madwoman is someone who stands as a rebel to these conventions. In the Indian context, this imaging is parallel to the Durgaⁱ (creator) and Kali (destroyer) images of women.

French feminists like Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva also challenge the patriarchal nature of language and urge that women find their voice independent of the male language. Cixous argues in her essay *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays* (1975) that the whole world is organized in some pairs of oppositions, which she says are couples. This includes the relationship between nature and culture, day and night, high and low, and thus man and woman. Cixous's argument is that all these couples have one superior to the other and thus they are hierarchal. Women will always be considered inferior in this way. It proves that all these binary concepts are but linguistic constructs in a patriarchal society. In reality, as Cixous argues there is no biological substantiation to the concepts of masculinity and femininity.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)

Betty Friedan is a noted American feminist. She talks about American women in her work *The Feminine Mystique*. Her work deals with the problem nearly all American women

suffered, irrespective of educational levels. She calls it 'a problem that has no name'. It means it is something that the women were unsatisfied with but they were unable to find the source of the problem and consequently a possible solution too. She discusses the American women in the 1950s, who were quite educated and had sound family lives, but they struggled to find their independent identity. They had some kind of desperation to go out of the routine. Friedan discusses the case of four women who narrate their multitasking stories. According to them, most of their time is spent in chasing their children. None of them seem to have any domestic help from their husbands. As one of them quotes, "The problem is always being the children's mommy, or the minister's wife and never being myself." (Friedan 28). She found that most of these women were so terribly tired that they had to seek medical advice for their boredom. As one of the physicians she mentions called this boredom 'housewife's fatigue'. (Friedan 30).

Gender Appropriate Behaviour

Nivedita Menon's work *Seeing Like a Feminist* deals with some radical questions in feminist thinking. For instance, she asks if a woman can ever say "I don't want to be a wife, I don't like this job?" (Menon 45). This book stands out as a detailed account of Indian feminist approach. It is particularly useful for the present study as the Menon discusses stereotypical representation of women at various levels, which she calls 'gender appropriate behavior'. She also questions the protocols of marriage for women when she discusses reported a case of a mother and her daughter thus: "Whenever I tell my mother to have fun, go out, wear interesting clothes, she says 'Now I am married, I can't do that.' If marriage is the end of life, how can it also be the goal of life?" (Menon 43).

The above situation is true in most Indian families. No matter how the world is thought of as a global village, women are yet to embrace their global image totally. They still feel that they have no choice but to conform to their hereditary roles of married Indian women. They may have a blurry idea of what exactly these roles contain, yet, they know well what not to do if they want to stick to those. Giving priority to family if there is a choice between job and family; giving priority to husband's or his family's choice to decide whether to make a career or not; if need be, taking a break from office to complete the household chores and not vice versa; are some of the commonest assumptions of married Indian women. Surprisingly, no one ever taught them to do so, but they acquired these roles from their earlier generation.

Conclusion

Women have to deal with a lot of issues throughout their life. Their primary problem is to deal with the patriarchal construct of womanhood that showers unrealistic expectations from women regardless of their social and economic strata. The problems discussed in this paper relate to working women struggling to approve their presence in the world outside while keeping their identity as a housewife intact. As discussed, all of these feminists have analysed various reasons for women's dependence on the male counterparts and also for their problems arising out of the home-world conflict. At some point, one might agree that women themselves are responsible to multiply their tasks by setting the standards of the ideal too high. But on the other hand, one must understand that women are not really promoting the existing patriarchal setup,

they are only trying to maintain harmony in the world at large by keeping their traditional roles unchanged.

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ⁱ According to Encyclopedia Britannica Durga was created for the slaying of the buffalo demon Mahisasura by Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and the lesser gods, who were otherwise powerless to overcome him. Embodying their collective energy (*shakti*), she is both derivative from the male divinities and the true source of their inner power. She is also greater than any of them. Born fully grown and beautiful, Durga presents a fierce menacing form to her enemies. Kali was supposed to have sprung from the anger of Durga.