

Feminist Writings
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Feminist Theory and Criticism

Shikriti: Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course of Feminist Writings. My name is Shikriti Shannal, I am a PhD scholar in the department of Humanities & Social Sciences of IIT Madras.

Mohit: Hello, my name is Mohit Sharma, I am a PhD scholar in the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Madras.

Shikriti: In today's discussion, we are going to talk about feminism as a movement and criticism and theory.

Mohit: And we'll take a feminist text which Dr. Parui has already taken up in class and we'll discuss them at some length. Let us define 'feminism'. Feminism is a movement, social, cultural and political which aims for the equality of sexes and which opposes discrimination on the basis of gender.

Shikriti: We could also say that it is a critical tool or a framework through which we can analyze various discourses and see how discrimination operates sexual difference.

Mohit: And how the underlying operation of women is highlighted and emphasized.

Shikriti: In different discourses of the time - we can take the social, cultural, political discourses as well as literature and popular media. And we can talk about life in general and see how discrimination operates at various levels.

Mohit: And the texts that we'll be discussing, highlight these political aspects, social aspects as well as the individual aspects in which the gender is used as a tool for oppression.

Shikriti: Yes, of course. And, so moving on, we can talk about the feminist movement a little in detail probably.

Mohit: Yes.

Shikriti: So, there are three phases to the feminist movement. The first phase, which is known as the Suffrage Movement, is mostly about acquiring voting rights for women.

Mohit: Yes, mainly the focus was on voting rights and education which enabled the women to acquire a central character in the social and political sphere in their nation, in their cultural life.

Shikriti: And acquire citizenship to a certain level. And then, we have authors like Virginia Woolf or Simone de Beauvoir, who extended this idea of the women's rights from voting rights to also be in equal footing in the academic sphere or the workforce.

Mohit: Yes, and that paved the way for the second wave feminism.

Shikriti: Yes, starting from the 1960s, then we have this new train of thought where women come to understand that the oppression lies at various levels and not just in the basic rights. And when the voting rights were acquired, they became more conscious of the other multiple levels of oppression that were at work.

Mohit: And also, a lot of the situation which led to the rise of the second wave was there because of the landscape and the (())(2:45) of Europe and America after the 2 world wars.

Shikriti: Yes.

Mohit: The 2 world wars had lead to a rapid decline in the workforce, the male workforce in the industry and that led to an introduction of women and a large number of women contributed to the economy of their countries.

Shikriti: Right.

Mohit: And they came to the forefront.

Shikriti: They were also exposed to the working atmosphere and they became more aware of their rights and they could understand more, they could challenge more the oppression that was at play.

Mohit: Yes, and with that liberty, came the demand for sexual and political rights and they began to see themselves as a political, as a sexual citizen and they saw that they were even more aware of the oppression that the social systems and the political systems prevalent were.

Shikriti: Right, I think that women basically challenged the stereotypes that came with gender roles - that women were supposed to do certain work - like they were restricted to the

domestic sphere, they were supposed to only take care of children and not participate in the outside world. So, that is the dichotomy that was created, that tension.

Mohit: Yes, and this question was taken up by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, and she called this the problem with no name. And she says that after world war 2, the American soldier and the males who participated in the war, they returned back and they expect like women to be at home for them, to bear their children and to be the loving wife. This leads to women being stereotyped into the role of a wife and mother.

Shikriti: Right, and Betty Friedan also says that the women actually aspired to become the suburban housewife and that was an aspiration to them. But then, the question arises that - when they were fulfilling their aspirations, why were they not happy?

Mohit: Yes, correct. And that led them to realize that to completely fulfill their roles as human individuals, they need to move forward, move ahead, beyond that 'housewife' role.

Shikriti: Yes, so they need to appreciate themselves as an individual and have their own dreams and aspirations which were thoroughly submerged under the pressures of the patriarchal society.

Mohit: Which led to the development of feminine consciousness and, like, the consolidation of identity and like experiences of what constitutes a woman, so to say.

Shikriti: I think this was a very important phase in the second wave where the category of women came to be identified and all the women came to join that force and they came to identify the similar sets of problems, or similar sets of experiences that all women have to undergo in their lives. And they wanted to change that for themselves.

Mohit: Yes, a common front was opened; a political and a social front was opened around which to consolidate their own identity and their own issues. And it was also explored in a lot of texts, like I said Betty Friedan's *'The Feminine Mystique'*. Another text *'Second Sex'* was seminal in creating such a front.

Shikriti: Right, and *'Second Sex'* is more important, I think, and you can associate it with the sentence that Beauvoir uses - that one is born but one becomes a woman. I think it is a very important thing from during that time because she comes to dissociate gender from biological sex. Simone de Beauvoir's work *'The Second Sex'* is very important because it distinguishes

biological sex from gender and it talks about gender as constructed by several discourses that operate around, in society.

Mohit: Another important feature of 2nd wave feminism is that the writers and the theorists in the 2nd wave feminism, they started the initiative to rediscover women's writing.

Shikriti: So, if we notice that before this phase in feminism, even in the academic circle, all the texts that were taught and introduced were male dominated text. So, if you were a woman writer, you were not actually understood as someone of importance and your content was criticized for being domestic.

Mohit: Neither was your voice...

Shikriti: Heard.

Mohit: ...uniquely identified as a female voice who is articulating the female consciousness. And that was the project that writers and theorists like Elaine Showalter took up and they tried to articulate women's voices in literature.

Shikriti: And one major aspect of this project was to rediscover women's writing, as Mohit previously mentioned, so female author texts were introduced in academia, they were reprinted and circulated by the Virago Press, for example, and more and more female voices started to be articulated and experiences started to be shared.

Mohit: India rediscovered as well in the 19th century. A lot of female writers who had previously been unknown, they were discovered. They were found out to articulate unique experiences of being a woman which were probably ignored in the mainstream canonical writings of let us say Jane Austen or Charlotte Bronte and other writers.

Shikriti: The idea was to build a separate canon for women because in the male dominated canon, women were not allowed, she did not have a place - the female author. So it was important to build a history of female writing which was the project taken up with Elaine Showalter and the other critics of her time. So Showalter distinguished...

Mohit: Between three phases, yes.

Shikriti: Yes, the three phases of feminist writing.

Mohit: Yes, which is feminine, feminist and the female phase. So in the 'feminine phase', she says that she strives to rediscover the writers who basically initiate the women's writing and who start by imitating the concerns, the genres and the forms that dominate male writing. And they move on to feminist writings.

Shikriti: Right, and in the feminist phase, the women writers were seen as a reaction, as reactionary to the male stereotypical representation of women in their texts. You could say that when we talk about male dominated texts, women were stereotypically represented as good and evil - the binary between the virgin and the whore. So they reacted to all these stereotypical representations of women and so their writing can be seen as reactionary and to a certain extent, protest and political.

Mohit: Yes, and it was from 1920 onwards that the third phase that Showalter characterizes as the female phase, starts, in which she says that from 1920 onward, especially in works of writers such as Virginia Woolf and other modernist writer such as Dorothy, Richardson, in which female writers start to explore the concept of what it is to be a woman, what it is to write as a woman and what it is to experience the world around themselves as women.

Shikriti: So, female, feminist writing was no longer a response to the patriarchal writing or the male authors, it had a voice of its own, a structure of its own which brings us to the important concept of 'gynocriticism' that was theorized by Elaine Showalter.

In gynocriticism, Elaine Showalter says that because women's writing is so different from men's writing and they address different issues than male authors, there needs to be a separate tool in order to critique that set of writing. Because the conventional tools are only proper to appreciate male authors and male experiences.

They do not incorporate the female articulation and female experiences. So she suggested that we should have a, just as she suggested the need for a separate canon for women, she suggested a need for a separate set of tools or troops to appreciate female writing.

Mohit: Right. And she identifies that the basic psychoanalytic for a textual tool might not be enough or might be very male oriented.

Shikriti: Right.

Mohit: ...to rediscover female and the feminine concerns in those writings. Another issue, like, towards the end and with the develop... post-structures perspective, it was also identified that there were a lot of issues with second wave feminism primarily with the category, with the universal category as woman.

Shikriti: Yes, the category of woman as seen by second wave feminism is a monolithic fixed category which primarily represents the white American or European middle class, upper class woman.

Mohit: Yes, and it excludes all other identities, all other experiences of a woman. For example, a black woman, a gender, a lesbian woman, and women... different regions and ethnicities.

Shikriti: From different races and different ethnicities.

Mohit: It articulates only the concerns of the American women and it couches them in a universalist language which suppresses the voices of other women.

Shikriti: Yes, to take an example, say the experiences of an upper class Manhattan woman cannot be the same as that of a Dalit woman in a rural area of India.

Mohit: True. That led to the development of the third wave feminism which was influenced with a lot of other theories building it around the same time, like the post-colonial theory which articulated the issues of other, the colonized nations and post-structuralism which also identified a lot of issues in how we perceive texts.

Shikriti: Yes. And in the third wave, I think the different voices or different experiences of feminism, feminism came to understand the difference within itself and it provided the space for different voices to emerge and different ethnicities and people of different sexualities came forward to represent themselves. So the unified and consolidated idea of the second wave feminism was diffused in the third wave where multiple identities and multiple stories were made available.

Mohit: And it is in that third wave feminism that we see a lot of theorists coming out and projecting a lot of theories which include the experiences of those women and it is very multifarious, multi-vocal and it tries to integrate their experiences in what it means to be a woman which we later on analyze in a lot of our texts.

Shikriti: Right. So we understand the third wave as a more inclusive way of understanding feminism which represents, or tries to represent the different categories of women from different backgrounds where everybody can have a platform to discuss their point.

Mohit: We will start with a text. The first text which we will take up is the essay 'Understanding Patriarchy' which again is an example of a seminal third wave feminism text. We'll start with the essay 'Understanding Patriarchy' by Bell Hooks. And as the titles indicates, Understand Patriarchy tries to understand patriarchy as a grand narrative which, in the words of Bell Hooks, is the single most life threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation.

Shikriti: It also does a brilliant job of deconstructing the binary between men as perpetrators of patriarchy and women as victims, like we usually understand. So when we talk about feminism, it is always women against men. And she is the one who identifies that the major problem or the primary, the root cause of the problem is patriarchy and not any particular biological sex.

Mohit: Yes. And Bell Hooks tries to understand how patriarchy suffuses all our social and cultural institutions and it is patriarchy which perpetuates this violence, gendered violence, both on the psychological and the physical level.

Shikriti: Physical level. And, so patriarchy comes as a grand narrative, a pre-determined given, so nobody questions it. And she discusses patriarchy as a discourse that is replicated in the institutions, the socio-cultural institutions and that we are taught to perform in different setups so that nobody can question its origin and it seems like natural.

Mohit: Yes. And she goes on to analyze how patriarchy operates as a natural given in our social institutions, even the most natural ones like family and education etc.

Shikriti: Right, exactly. So maybe expanding a little or giving some examples, we can talk about how patriarchy operates in the family, okay? And we don't understand it, it is not given in the face, we think that it is how it should be.

Mohit: And how it can be identified in how we regulate children's behavior, how we regulate children's play which is what we see in the essay as given by Bell Hooks when she talks about her own experiences as a child in a mid-west household where she plays with marbles

and her brother plays with marbles, which leads to a harrowing story of violence perpetrated, gendered violence.

Shikriti: Right, and we can have similar examples in our own family settings where boys are encouraged to play with cars or guns and little girl children are expected to play with toys like dolls and cooking machinery which would make them as potential householders.

Mohit: Right. Boys are encouraged to go and play outside, go get hurt, it is better if you get hurt, you will become strong.

Shikriti: Yes. They are encouraged for more physical activity and women are encouraged to be passive, obedient, docile bodies and individuals.

Mohit: Which is also what Bell Hooks indicated in one of the passages here - that a male child is taught that his value consisting his ability to perpetrate controlled violence.

Shikriti: Right.

Mohit: And, a female child's nature should be the one to show emotions and the one to refrain from violence. So we see that all these discourses of patriarchy are instilled into people right from the very childhood...

Shikriti: Right from the childhood, even when a child is born; it starts with the name probably, or even then, if you are born in a particular biological sex, the entire script is given to you - what kind of positions are available for you to take up or what kind of subjectivities starting from games to education to what kind of career choices, everything is determined by the gender of the child.

Mohit: And we see in the example given by Bell Hooks, how the particular event of violence which was inflicted on the girl child, Bell Hooks herself, as a child, it becomes a sort of psychological terrorism which both disciplines a girl child in her own role and the boy child in his own role.

Shikriti: And the entire system operates through reward and punishment. So if you adhere to the roles that are prescribed by society, you are rewarded and you don't, you are penalized, just like in this text - Bell Hooks discusses her own experience in how she is penalized for arguing with her father and insisting on playing the marble game.

Mohit: So, this is the dual phase of a this course, a grand narrative so to say, which is naturalized through obedience, but if you don't obey, then you will be punished either via violence or through psychological violence, let's say shaming.

Shikriti: Right. And then, she brings a very important connection of PTSD - the post traumatic stress disorder which we usually associate to post-war exposure. So, she brings it in the family context and she says that these punishments, in the shape of punishments, these scars that we receive live with us for the rest of our lives, they are not so easy to get rid of.

Mohit: Yes, and another incident that we see in which such a stress occurs at the level of childhood is when Terrence Real shows us the example in which a boy who likes to dress up as a girl is shamed, instantly shamed by his playmates. And even that leaves a scar on the boy child. And it is through these examples that we get see that trauma is a thing which doesn't act only in the field of war or in the...

Shikriti: Right, trauma can be domesticized as well. And we can also see, Mohit, very interestingly, that patriarchy is something that does not only restrict the girl child or affect the girl child, it affects the boy child as well. Like the example that you just took - here the boy child was trying to dress as a woman, is again not appreciated or not rewarded, rather punished or laughed at. So, it shows that patriarchy expects each gender to stick to their own roles and not exceed them or challenge them in any way.

Mohit: Yes. It is here that we see how patriarchy as an ideology, as a grand narrative affects both men and women in the same way because, by instituting men as perpetrators, it is also installing men as victims in their own category because it stunts their emotional development.

Shikriti: Yes, and they are not able to achieve the emotional wholeness of empathy because they see life through this frame of violence, through their masculinity which needs to be asserted at all levels, every time. They are forced to behave in that violent, aggressive fashion.

Mohit: Yes, which is why she describes patriarchy as a social disease, because it makes an emotional cripple out of men and it inflicts both men and women with trauma. During childhood which they have to carry or which they...

Shikriti: Find very difficult to overcome.

Mohit: Find very difficult to overcome till very late in their adulthood.

Shikriti: Right, and it shapes the way we see ourselves as human beings and shapes the way in which our future entails.

Mohit: One very important way in which patriarchy incinerates itself as a grand narrative in people's mind and in societies by disguising itself. Because if you go and ask people - why do you think, what is the problem in gender discrimination, people will say it is violence, gender violence, sex violence and the sexual assaults in women. People usually do not identify patriarchy...

Shikriti: As a male problem.

Mohit: As a male problem, as a problem which is at the root of these issues

Shikriti: Yes. Because mostly, we see men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims.

Mohit: Yes, it is only the external phase of violence which is visible.

Shikriti: Right.

Mohit: But most of the people are used to see patriarchy as a beneficial... to society in general.

Shikriti: Yes, and especially for the men; they feel that patriarchy is beneficiary to them because they obviously enjoy a certain degree of power and privilege in society. But what they don't understand, or what is not apparent is that how it is like a disease...

Mohit: It makes them emotional cripples and it also dehumanizes them; in making them perpetrators - it also dehumanizes them.

Shikriti: It also makes them behave in a certain way that does not let them achieve their full capacity as a human being, like a rational and emotional human being.

Mohit: And it is not only men who are, who think patriarchy is beneficial, but like women are also equally prone to fall into this belief that it is not patriarchy, as such, which is at the root of these issues. And Bell Hooks takes up this thing and she points out to the fact that it is not only homes with mother and father which has this patriarchal model of obedience and domination, but in...

Shikriti: Even in families with single parents - like a single mother, we'll see the same patriarchal set of because we have this idea of the absent father. Even when the father is not there, the mother has to behave like the father or she follows the same protocols that a male entity would.

Mohit: Yes, and the absent father becomes an idealized figure which is to be revered and which is to followed then.

Shikriti: So till this point, whatever we have discussed, we have seen that when we talk about feminist theory or movement, it is not a fight between the sexes or the gender. It is actually a fight against patriarchy where both the sexes should come together and fight.

Mohit: It says that anti-male feminists, when they are fighting against males, and they are fighting against male oppression are basically couching their own desire for power.

Shikriti: Right, and they are replacing one system of power with another system of power.

Mohit: Right, they are not really deconstructing the binary and they are not really deconstructing that it is the binary which, both which causes...

Shikriti: Which we need to do away with.

Mohit: Yes, because of which the issues that men also face are not resolved.

Shikriti: Right. So the patriarchy as a problem to men is a very and novel idea that Bell Hooks proposes. Because before this, as we previously discussed that patriarchy was understood as a problem primarily of women, but since henceforth, through Bell Hooks essay, we can understand how it affects both the genders.

Mohit: Right. And another thing that Bell Hooks points out in this essay, in fact, she reveals it through the way she structures the narrative, is that gender relations and patriarchy is something which needs to be understood both on the experiential and the textual level. Because often times, we textualize these differences, the binaries of oppression and we do not see that...

Shikriti: We do not give enough stress to that everyday lived experiences of patriarchy. And...

Mohit: Which can be more complex than those binaries indicate.

Shikriti: Exactly, so we can see, at different levels, how patriarchy works in order to oppress women. Say whether it be the objectification of the female body or the creation of docile, passive women and women with passive sexuality. So just like women are given these passive roles to adhere to, men are just given the opposite.

Mohit: Yes, and the idea of a passive male, or a peaceful male so to say, is strongly opposed by such a narrative. And a man which is a peaceful, passive male, is shamed or is forced to change his way of living in such a case - which we see in the example that she gives of her own partner.

Shikriti: Right. And then, so we see that patriarchy promotes a certain kind of lifestyle in men through this macho, masculine exhibition where it makes men prone to addiction and violence and trauma of all different sorts of levels. So, Bell Hooks asks that if patriarchy is so beneficial to men, how come they are constantly prone to trauma, depression, and addiction.

Mohit: Right, which is where the experiential part of the picture comes in.

Shikriti: Exactly.

Mohit: So one important point that Bell Hooks points out is that it is a complex relation between experientiality and textuality that men are perpetrators as well as victims.

Shikriti: And also we can, through this understanding of patriarchy that Bell Hooks proposes, we can identify patriarchy as a performance which, you know, we reproduce in different contexts, socio-cultural contexts differently, but it is something that is not voluntary of the human being or the individual. It is something that is proposed by the society and that is basically a discourse that is performed by the individuals.

Mohit: Another aspect of patriarchy which is often disguised is how it replicates itself. In the case of Bell Hook's partner, he ultimately becomes the same person that he doesn't want to be for somebody that he opposes. And this is the way how patriarchy replicates and perpetuates itself.

Shikriti: Yes. Another important aspect of patriarchy perpetrating itself and replicating itself is through the process of embodiment which Dr. Parui has discussed in detail. You know, because when we try to understand a certain set of or follow a certain set of norms, we come

to live it. And it is experienced by us and it is reproduced through us in the way we dress, in the way we talk, in the way we...

Mohit: In the way we play.

Shikriti: Exactly, in the entire way we conduct ourselves as human beings. So, we can see how patriarchy operates at very intricate levels and not always on very apparent levels like male violence over women but also very... in a family context, in the context of the most intimate spaces where we feel the most comfortable and protected.

Mohit: Yes, which is why Bell Hooks stresses at the end that while countering anti-male activists... which is why Bell Hooks stresses at the end that while opposing anti-male feminists that we need to work with males, we need to work with men and understand their problems in understanding how patriarchy works in deconstructing its premises, try to remove it.

Shikriti: So one model of domination cannot be replaced with another model of domination. So then what we are looking forward to is a society without patriarchy where men and women both can function at equal footing and where patriarchy does not destroy the empathetic and human relationship that can exist in a society, through violence and perversion.

Mohit: Right. So in this session, we have covered feminism, the evolution of feminist thought and we covered the essay 'Understanding Patriarchy' by Bell Hooks.

Shikriti: Where we came to understand the term, or analyze the term 'patriarchy' in great detail and how it operates in multiple layers of society as well as culture and politics. Thank you.