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A Review of Feminist Theories

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Creative writings by and about women constitute an important part of literature in twentieth century in almost all languages of the world. There has been much thinking about 'Gender' in literature. Novels, poems, and essays interrogating male hierarchies, challenging gender role models, satirizing notions of male superiority are pouring in from all quarters of the world and from different cultures. Loercher Diana rightly points out that "Writing about women has reached the point of constituting a new literary genre."

It was not surprising that the intellectually charged atmosphere gave rise to other systematic studies, giving birth to different feminist theories. Feminist theory is, then, an extension of feminism into theoretical and philosophical ground. Feminist theories, by and large, try to understand and analyze the nature of inequality. They focus their attention on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality.

Based on Freud's psychoanalytical theories, The Psychoanalytical Feminism attempts to prove that the gender is not biological. On the contrary, it is based on the psycho-sexual development of the individual. Psychoanalytical feminists are of the opinion that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences, which lead men to believe themselves as masculine, and women to believe themselves as feminine. It is further maintained that gender lead to a social system that is dominated by males, which in turn influences the individual psycho-sexual development.

Nancy Julia Chodorow is a leading contemporary psychoanalytical feminist theorist. Her books *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (1994), and *The power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (1999) are widely acclaimed. Chodorow shares Freud assertion that the individual is born bio-sexual and that the child's mother is its first sexual object. The child forms its ego in reaction to the dominating figure of the mother. The male child forms this sense of independent agency easily. He identifies with the agency and freedom of the father and emulates his possessive interest in the mother. But this task is not as simple for the female child. The mother identifies with her more strongly. The daughter attempts to make the father her new love object. But she is stymied in her formation by the intense bound with mother.

Liberal Feminism concentrates on the legislation aspect in the fight against patriarch. It criticizes and analyses the ways in which women are excluded from power and prevented from playing a full part in political activity. Women are marginalized by denying the same



opportunities to them even though they have the same mental capacity as their male counterparts. Hence they should be given equal opportunities in political, economic, social, and professional spheres. Women should have the right to choose.

Liberal feminists promote and support acts of legislation to demand equal access to jobs and equal pay for the women. However, liberal feminism is criticized for neglecting deeper ideologies of society and patriarchy.

Radical Feminism believes that the radical (= root) cause of the problem of women's oppression is patriarchy. Thus the radical feminists want to dismantle the patriarchy altogether. The extreme radical feminists like Valerie Solanas (in her SCUM Manifesto 1960) calls for the destruction of the entire community of men and men-loving women. Andrea Dworkin is also well-known for her claim (presented in collaboration with feminist legal theorist Catharine McKinnon) that sex between a man and a woman in society where women have less power amounts to a rape of the woman by the man. Similarly many significant works like Anne Koedt's essay *Myth of vaginal Orgasm* and Shulamith firestone's *The Dialectics of Sex* gave impetus to the ideology of the radical feminism.

Radical feminists claim that the oppression of the women is the first, most widespread, and deepest oppression. They reject many scientific theories, data, and experiences because they exclude women and are not women-centered. Similarly radical feminism clashes with liberal feminism because radical feminists believe that society can and must be changed by radical actions and not by legislation alone. They want to free women from the rigid gender roles imposed upon them by the society. They also emphasize their differences from men and form groups that exclude males completely. They highlight the importance of individual feelings, experiences, and relationships. Radical feminists believe that femininity and reproduction limit women's capacities to contribute to society. Women should essentially be androgynous. They like to violate sexual norms and believe that women should control every aspect of their sexuality. They also advocate artificial means of reproduction so that less time is devoted to pregnancy and more time is devoted to worthwhile things. They promote abortions, contraceptives, and other forms of birth control. Radical feminism sees sex and penetration as male dominated. It sees a link between sex, female subordination, porn, rape, and abuse. Some radical feminists believe that reproduction is a source of power for women. Men are jealous of this power. Hence women should try to control reproduction by adopting new technology.

Marxist feminism believes that capitalism is the root cause of economic inequality and political confusion as well as the unhealthy relations between men and women. Hence, it is the main cause of women's oppression too. In capitalist societies the individual is shaped by class relations. Marxist feminists see gender inequality as determined by the capitalist mode of production. A Marxist feminist organization 'Radical Women' in its manifesto claims that the enslavement of women was the first building block of an economic system based on private property. They think that elimination of the capitalist profit-driven economy will remove the motivation for sexism and other forms of oppression.



Socialist Feminism encompasses the Marxist feminism's argument of the role of capitalism in women's oppression and the radical feminism's views of the role of gender and patriarchy. Some socialist feminists criticize Marxist feminism for failing to find the inherent connection between patriarchy and classism. They believe that Marxist feminism's view of gender oppression as a sub-class of class oppression is naïve. Hence they try to separate gender phenomenon from class phenomenon.

However, some other socialist feminists use the works of Marx and Engle themselves to explain the link between gender oppression and class exploitation. Thus the Socialist Feminism attacks the common root of sexism, racism, and classism, i.e. , the determination of a life based on accidents of birth or circumstances. Gayle Rubin in her famous essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex' (1975) criticizes Marx, without dismissing his fundamentals, for his incomplete analysis of sexism under capitalism. Socialist feminists believe that although women are divided by class, race, ethnicity, and religion, they all experience oppression for being a woman. Thus to end women's oppression it is necessary to end the oppression both of class and gender. Hence women must work side by side men in the political sphere.

Cultural Feminism acknowledges the fundamental biological differences between men and women and encourages the women to celebrate these differences. Women have some inherent characteristics like gentleness, kindness, and sophistication. Contemporary Western patriarchal society gives importance to male ideas of independence, hierarchy, competition, and domination. Females generally value ideas like interdependence, cooperation, relationships, community, trust, and peace. Hence the world will be a much more better place if it is governed and controlled by women.

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