



## ***Self-Nested Prison of Constraints: Feminism, Theory, Praxis and Beyond***

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### **Abstract:**

*In the book entitled “The Birth and Death of Literary Theory Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond” (2019), Galin Tihanov conspicuously stated that the Russian-born literary theories are now facing serious ideological challenges where the foundational notion of literary theory in understanding broader socio-cultural-textual phenomena are frequently interrogated. The story of feminism as woman-centric approach of understanding the socio-political condition of woman is now facing strong and serious antipathy. The ideological notions that women are weak, passive and secondary citizens are now seen as psychological stigma. It is the self-constructed psychological stigma and a prison that women across the globe fabricated for themselves. The theoretical approach to understand women’s condition better is a part of European sophistry and its legacy. It is Europe made world view to perceive the world. This perception is to some extent Europe imposed view point to understand life. We, the investigators of this present study wishes to configure the often-met limitations and inauthenticity of feminism in Indian context in regard to praxis. We also aim at architecting a view point if feminism is more a psychological stigma that is designed by the self, less a solution to raise the conditions of women in general.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Europe Imposed View, Psychological stigma, a-fence-to-break-by-own

### **INTRODUCTION**

Considering the last two determinative decades, the inquirers of feminism have embossed indispensable remonstrance to the fashion social science has spelled out men, women and society. Since the dawn, argument about epistemology, method and methodology, have been braided with confabulation of how to amend the distorted and partial accounts best, in the context of the traditional analyses. To hook the extent and depth of the metamorphosis

of social sciences enforced in order to discern women and gender activities, one needed to espy the circumspections of the most conspicuous ways one could aspire to amend the androcentrism of the traditional analyses. Feminist have endeavoured to ‘*add women*’ into these analyses. We find women of three kinds, who arose as undeniable candidates for this mechanism: women who aided to the public life, of whom the social scientists were already studying, women who are social scientists, and lastly women who had been the prey of the most egregious and flagrant forms of male pre-eminence.

### **CONDITION OF LITERARY THEORY AT A GLANCE**

One of the indispensable queries of literary theory rests on ‘*What is literature?*’ Many literary scholars and contemporary theorists although believe that ‘*literature*’ is not definable nor there is any reference to the use of language. Definite theories are acclaimed not only because of their conclusions and methods, but even by how a meaning is created from a ‘*text*’. However, theorists endorse that these texts do not confer a singular and fixed meaning which is propelled ‘*correct*’. Usually such forming and shaping delivers the ceasing of recounting imaginary stories, or even of conjuring intensified emotions or that of disseminating thoughts. The Russian Formalists took concern with the perception that form is only clothing adhered to meaning. Rather, the form endures on its own and this is what fashions literature ‘*literary*’. Interestingly enough, form is not galvanised by meaning. Form has its own innominate history and rules.

While considering Formalism, premising its social relevance, it strives to curtail the ontological content encompassing the discipline to a margin by either outlawing or radically curbing attributes to any sort of intra- orgasmic and/ or intrapsychic motivational factor. Formalists acknowledged individual level of determinants as simply an epiphenomenon, which can be ‘*reduced*’ to genuine structuralist mechanism. The Russian-born theories though not completely ruled out, have lost its practicality to a greater extent. Thereafter, while looking into a woman-centric approach of understanding society and its conventions, loose the ideological dogma of the formalists, since it is no more the form that matters but the content and the approach of looking at the social conditions, which make feminist approach more valid.

### **GROWING AVERSION FOR THE THEORIZED PERCEPTION OF LIFE**

For the historians, men's reason no less than actions are inseparable from their values and their attitudes. His norm for judging them is not some intellectual construct of his own- but lies in the evidence for their behaviour. It is for him to disengage it and reconstruct it, through the rules of a scholastic disputation or the growth of Methodism. Any area of knowledge only becomes intelligible through some principle of selection and its methodical application. To find a meaning in a situation is not thereby to introduce it from outside but rather to give coherence to what men have found meaningful.

Marx handed us the '*Legacy of Praxis*' most competently in his 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach: '*The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.*' Critical theorists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and presently in the 21<sup>st</sup>, have processed to verify the determinants and target of such decisive praxis. What remained paramount to critical theory in terms of its form of thought was its dexterity to espy the deep-seated affiliation between action and thought. Marx here asseverates the supremacy of praxis over theory, asserting that theoretical variance can only be concluded through practical ventures. Social life of any sort is quintessentially practical. The entire conundrum which sparks theory is routing mysticism, treasure their analytical and impartial explanation in human praxis and in the cognizance of this praxis.

Social theory coevally is in crisis. All along the 1960s, a gamut of advanced theoretical paradigms cropped up which grilled the prevailing positivist, empiricist and quantitative conceptions of social theory and research. Augmenting exasperation with the commanding theories and methodologies, rendered by the mainstream endorsed a quest for alternative conceptions and methodologies of social research. The new paradigms of phenomenology, Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and the others extended new speculations which solicited to be more competent in delineating a courant society and in catering guidance and inspiration for revamping it. These theories have brainstormed much commotion in the domain of social theory and have energised heated altercation over the methods, nature and goals of critical theory. Critical theory is thus impressively self-critical and self-reflexive, enforcing theorists to unceasingly concern themselves with contemplations on the nature, method and effects of a critical theory. Here, they believed, the disintegration of subjectivity, forsook the promise of modernity, which itself was implied on the presupposition that the accretion of science and technology would enhance human control and dominance over nature and harvest greater individuality, freedom and happiness.

## **EVERY 'ISM' IS A PRISON**

To say that a theory is contingent, or that it poses a variety of dimensions, is not to hypothesize an asseverate of unmitigated freedom; but is rather to halt at the possible alternatives. These are not necessarily the outcome of a free choice, but may indeed arise precisely because there is no single determinant to induce it. Thus, paradoxically, theories are inherent in human affairs less through individual freedom of choice, which in important matters is often so circumscribed as to be of marginal effect, than through the absence of conscious choice. On one hand, most situations are the result of a series of intersecting actions, which as we have said are the product of a number of wills acting independently of and often in opposition to each other, hence their outcome is neither willed nor foreseen by their agents. An act is free only because it consists on deciding to do one thing rather than another; and the act of choosing eliminates the alternatives in which its freedom consisted. Hence, 'ism' is a series of some theoretical arguments and perspectives which are threaded harmoniously. The moment one starts seeing the world with theory, the independent will of assessing the world ceases, and a conspicuous and integrated perspective is begotten, which a person cannot wilfully overcome. In most of the cases, one remains comfortable with the impressions already formed. One remains very conservative to accept any new world view. The world becomes limited to one. It grows into a very narrow niche of self-constructed universe. It is kept undisturbed and noiseless. In a word, these strongly and deeply believed ideas form a prison. The believer grows blind. S/he considers nothing outside, and remains moveless with the views and perspectives already taken into count. The problem for the feminists is that most of the believers are women. They relate their own lives with theory or theorized perspectives and this grows into firm and stigmatic belief which form a psychological prison in itself. The liberal mind set is lost. One remains satisfied and contends with belief already accepted and concluded as full. Thus, the self-constructed prison is conceived by its rigid practitioners. It transcends into a prison that one generation passes to another. The legacy of some deep rooted belief continues. The prison remains changeless.

## **EUROPE IMPOSED STORY**



Feminist criticism predominately acknowledges to the way women are represented in literature. It consists of two basic turfs; first, 'woman' as represented in literature by the male writers purporting their own perspective, and second, 'woman' represented in the works of female writers from their perspective. Doing this, the first gives acceleration to Phallogocentrism, the second pushes up to Gynocriticism which are usually understood as 'a development and movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature which was well under way by the late 1960's and which has burgeoned steadily since. It is an attempt to describe and interpret (and reinterpret) women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature- especially the novel and to a lesser extent, poetry and drama.' (Cuddon, Pg 315)

The theoretical foundation of feminist criticism is said to be laid by Simone de Beauvoir's book titled '*The Second Sex*'. '*In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature and the exclusion of women from literary history.*' (Elaine Showalter) The other dimensions of feminist criticism refer to the women as readers and women as writers. The feminist believe that in order to understand woman's position in the world, one has to understand the system of patriarchy. Men all over the world have looked at women from their point of view. Not only that, they have also taught and forced women to look at themselves and the society from the male point of view. Feminism is an ideology which seeks not only to understand the world but to change it to the advantage of women. Simone de Beauvoir's phrase '*the second sex*' with reference to women cut ice. She opines that woman's idea of herself as inferior to man and dependent on him, springs from her realization that '*the world is masculine on the whole, those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today, are men.*' Though the biological difference between the two sexes is an accepted fact, socio-cultural notions are rejected.

The old prejudice against women as being weaker section of the society, precisely weaker than man, is also reflected in the language system- particularly in English, where one can notice the pronoun is largely male-oriented. Now there is not a single position in the society, including administration and government which is not occupied by the women. Thus feminist movements aims at overthrowing social practices that lead to the oppression and victimization of women lock, stock and barrel. Hence, the feminist writers decry the

'images of women' as illustrated by the men. The concept of femininity and masculinity are social constructs. Kate Millet in her book '*Sexual Politics*' maintains that sexual politics is a process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain the extend its power over the subordinate sex. She suggests that social and cultural contexts of a work of art should be taken into account in order to understand it in its proper perspective.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AS A KEY**

It becomes important to talk about the concept of '*consciousness*' and '*unconsciousness*' here. Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) examined the problems women face; she advocated a balance between a '*male*' self-realization and '*female*' self-annihilation. She rejected the notion of a separate feminist consciousness and hoped to achieve a femininity of the unconscious so that there is no conflict between male and female sexuality, an '*escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness.*' In an influential essay '*Professions for Women*', she considered the problems of women writers, particularly the writers of her period. Women writers, according to her, were imprisoned in the '*ideology of womanhood*', the ideal of the '*Angel in the house*'; in addition the taboo about women talking about their passions prevented them from telling the truth about their experiences as a body. These obstacles, she felt, could be removed only when women achieve social and economic equality with men.

### **FEMINISM AS A-FENCE-TO-BREAK-BY-OWN**

Feminism has a completely different understanding and implementation in Indian context. Indian society as a whole is composed of different religions, languages, class, cultures, traditions and different historic events which shaped each of these cluster of people, their socio-cultural dimensions and outlooks, which in turn is so very different from the westernised theories and concepts of feminism. India has a history of feminist resistance long back even when the term '*feminism*' did not even exist, with the Buddhist nuns, who wanted '*Mukti from the Grahesti*' (*Freedom from domestic life*), since domestic life meant bindings, leading to dominance and oppression, which was not to be accepted by them.

We cannot reject the western concepts of the great feminists, but before reaching them we need to know and read Indian feminists like, Mahadevi Verma, to understand what our culture, society or religion feels and understands about feminism. Indian feminists, did not find it relevant to overrule patriarchy, since there was a parallel importance of the societal

formation, at the same time did not want to be subordinated by them too. They wanted things which were meant to be theirs- mostly, respect, appreciation of work, emotional freedom. According to Mahadevi Verma, '*women in spite of having all the qualities, they have turned to be a gamut of virtue and culture, which has to be now arisen and shaken.*' These words are relevant still now. Those issues, and even the issues which we are dealing with now can only be solved according to the feminists, with the physical participation of women in economy, socially and culturally, with emotional freedom and most importantly, psychological expansion, of both the sexes. The thought of considering women inferior, irrespective of religion, country, race or the period in which they live, sex-stereotyping should be absolved.

### **INDIA'S OWN STORY**

Literature is an expression of society. It means that literature mirrors the current social situation correctly. This is false; it only shows some aspect of the society. It does not mirror the whole life. The artist conveys both social and historical truth. A work of art is a social document because it shows social truth of cultural and artistic value. The writer's pronouncement must not be confused with the actual social implication of his work. For example, Balzac's sympathy was with the church and with the aristocracy. Yet his imagination was engaged by the speculators and businessmen. So there is a difference between the profession of faith and ability. On the whole, in modern times, the theory and practice of abilities are completely differentiated.

Scholars comply that it's very arduous to extent the '*status of women*', in relation to a diverse and large country like India. While in India, women theoretically are adorned with an estimated number of legal rights and redress, in practicality these are declined to them. The Fundamental Rights included in the Indian constitution- equality under the law for men and women (Article 14), equal pay for equal work (Article 39), equal opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16), equal accessibility to the public spaces (Article 15). In addition there are provisions that guarantee rights, such as the Maternity Benefit Act, 1976 and the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976. Section 498 A of Indian Penal Code, 1983, criminalises mental and physical cruelty to married women bolstered by their husbands and in-laws. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 prohibits the taking and giving of dowry. The Hindu Succession Act, 1955, grants equal rights to parental self-acquired property.

Studies have suggested that variables including women's access to education, the media and paid employment are some economic pointers to women's status, while participation in decision making, age at marriage, extent of, social and personal acceptance of domestic violence, and women's mobility are social indicators. While some Indian women have attained prestigious posts in the judiciary, education, politics, IT, medicine and other myriad fields, these benefits are denied to the majority of women in the country. We had female Prime Minister, President, two Lok Sabha Speakers, sixteen Chief Ministers of different states etc, yet we still lag behind in achieving the Women's Reservation Bill, 2008. Hence there are contradictions in terms of theory to praxis and western to Indianisation of the concept of feminism.

National data establishes that proportions of women working for money are minor in most of the states in India, as related to women's freedom of movement and access to the public sphere more generally. Only one in four visit friends and relatives without permission, and one in three women can go to the market without permission from their family. Women are found to be less educated than men, with only just over 50 per cent of the female population in India being literate, as compared to 75 per cent of the male population. Thereafter not surprisingly therefore, women enter into marriages much earlier than men. There is also revelation that one in five women have experienced some form of violence from their husbands, or other members of their families, with a huge number of married women aged between 15 to 49 accepting that a man is justified in beating his wife if she does not fulfil accepted gender roles, including cooking, if her natal family do not provide the expected dowry or found neglecting the home. Dowry demands at marriage are a part of Indian marriages, while dowry was once a Hindu upper caste custom; it has become a part of the marriage customs of different castes and communities. Thereafter this has been considered as one of the reasons leading to son preference, leading to female infanticide and sex pre-selection and abortion of female foetuses, therefore leading to the sex ratio, which in contrast with western societies, favours men to women with 927 women per 1000 males in the 1991 census. The 1991 census marks the trend of the continuing and what has been called '*a secular decline in the sex ratio from the beginning of the last century*'.

Structural factors such as class, caste and community impact on women's path to rights, and freedom from violence to be connected with the socio-economic developments.



Illustrating examples, poverty and other modes of social destitution have been raised to be the lone and most vital reason that women in India enter procuring sex trade, which has been seen as an area of intensive violence against women absorbed in the trade. Adding to that, Indian women have limited admission to mainstream political power. Various studies have identified flimsy links betwixt feminist movements and the political interests of women parliamentarians.

The relationship between 'western' and 'Indian' feminisms has been one of intense debates within the Indian women's movement; Indian feminists simultaneously are claiming an international feminist solidarity with groups and individuals worldwide, including the west and a specific 'Indian' sensitivity. In the 1970s, the rise of liberal and radical feminism in the west meant that the focus of the international decade of women (1975–1985) was around demands for equal opportunities in education and employment and focus on ending violence against women. In India, the newly emerging feminist movement based its appeal to these varied values and concepts, while examining the ways in which women in India had not benefited from international 'development'. Therefore the 'Status of Women' report commissioned by the State focused both on 'liberal' issues of women's education and employment and on 'radical' ones of violence, revealing that Indian feminists in this period were both influenced by western debates, but were able to adapt the debates creatively due to national and local concerns.

Indian feminists have often made demands to the Indian State for amendments in law and policy based on international developments; most often the appeal is based on the Indian State's acceptance of international conventions. Therefore feminist demands to legislate against specific forms of what are considered gender based violence, including trafficking into prostitution and sexual harassment in the workplace are legitimised in part by appeals to conventions such as the Convention Against Discrimination of Women. In the case of other issues such as dowry related violence against women, Sati, sex selective abortions and custodial rape, in the main feminists focused on the specific manifestations of indigenous patriarchies that were seen as being reflected within these forms of gender-based violence.

However, in such cases appeals can be made on the basis of the need to modernise according to western standards of gender equality; and in others feminists have suggested

that some of these forms of violence against women are less specifically 'Indian' than reflecting a wider global trend of patriarchal oppression of women. While influences from the west have been acknowledged by several feminist activists, and theorists; there are several indications within women's movement activism that it is not a case of 'borrowing' outside context. The campaigns against violence against women included an in-depth and sophisticated understanding of the nature of Indian society.

Similarly, the campaigns on domestic violence focused initially, on dowry related murders and the role of mothers-in-law as perpetrators of violence against women. Dowry related violence was understood as a form of gender-based violence that was based on the low status of women in general as disposable. The spread of dowry from an essentially upper caste Brahmin and Hindu custom to a 'nationally' adopted one among varied castes and communities – sometimes replacing the more egalitarian custom of bride price – has also been understood as a form of increased consumerism of contemporary Indian society, where the traditionally low status of women had led to a further marginalisation of their rights.

Therefore, while the Indian women's movement is influenced and alternatively influences, western debates, it is unusual within feminisms in the substantial links it has counterfeited with different other social movements. In addition, feminists both support other social movements such as caste struggles, environmental and anti globalisation movements and gay rights movements, but also raise the women's issues within these movements. In spite of the nuances within feminist perception of Indian society, the rhetoric of 'westernisation' has been used persistently as a charge to embarrass feminists. As historians of colonial India often demonstrated, Indian nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century defined the home and thus indicates domestic arrangements as areas where colonialism could not and indeed should not impact. Thereafter, nationalist struggles were fought at the public arena, and to protect the home from the colonial encounter. The need to protect the home – and by extension, gender relations within the home – from the corrupting influences of the west is a continuing concern in contemporary India, one with which feminists are constantly confronted by.

Marital rape is approved and acquitted in civil and criminal law. This in turn legitimises social norms of male superiority and dominance within a marriage. This finds its strength

in other clauses of the marriage laws. Finding evidence, marriage laws have bigoted minimum age of marriage, i.e.18 years for women and 21 for men. This confirms the socially recognised hierarchy of experience and age. The Hindu cultural anticipation in marriage rests on male hypogamy and female hypergamy, thus men are proposed to be older, have maturity and social experience, allowing them to be dominant in relation to their wives. These laws also reflect the cultural and social concern for detaining the sexuality of women at their youth within marriage, as soon as she attains sexual maturity. Sexual harassment of women is an endemic part of public life in India, and can be understood as an expression of masculine sexual control over women who have stepped out of the normative private sphere. Sexual harassment of women in public places is named and culturally constructed in India as 'eve teasing', a specifically 'Indian-English' term. The semantic roots of the term, 'eves' as temptresses being 'teased' normalises and trivialises the issue. *'Why, in the first place, is it so difficult to talk about sexuality and why is it so necessary to do it all the same?...In India, the need to discuss sexuality seems to emerge much more as a tail piece to the discussion of fertility and fertility control'* (Dietrich 1992, 22).

It has often been suggested that within Indian feminisms, that the focus on legal rights and on violence against women in the 1980s and 1990s created a narrow and somewhat rigid view of sexuality, which focused on 'negative' aspects of women's sexuality, in the context of discussions on rape, adultery and reproductive rights of women, rather than as an important part of Indian women's lives. Where issues relating to the sexual choices of women are raised, feminist response had often been defensive – stating that sexual choices such as lesbianism are 'Indian' – or verging on rejection of such choices – therefore discomfort with claims of sex work as 'positive sexuality'. The issue of domestic violence has been one of the major campaigns for feminists in India. Both Indian and western feminists have problematised the specific nature of dowry related violence as being a specific form of 'Indian' domestic violence which has been seen as being accompanied by dowry demands. There are, however, diversities in the nature and the context of the struggles and campaigns around this issue in different parts of the country.

Female victims of violence within marriage have supported the shameless fact, that the police is unsympathetic and less interested related to cases of domestic violence filled by the women. There have been ample cases where the police have rejected and refused to

accept the files of domestic violence, excluding few exceptional cases. The police echo the social prejudice that the family and conjugal life should be protected. There are ample cases, where the cases of violence, rapes and teasing are not even dragged to the police in fear of the family reputation and suppressed internally. Poorer clients are most often turned away, while middle class women are advised to return to their marital home. The question of child custody is also a concern in these cases and hence women are bound to adjust and forced to live in the marital home. The police very often fail to inform and make the women aware about their rights. Quoting few lines from a poem published in *Vimochanand, 1*, in this context;

*I am Chandrika*

*I am Gayatri*

*I am Fatima, Banu, Uma,*

*I am Jayalakshmi,*

*I am Saraswati.*

*I am one of those faceless women who die everyday in your morning newspapers and go on to become a crime number in the Police Station and then a file to be pushed around in the courts...'*

A law passed in 2005, the Domestic Violence Act, that was closely aligned to the draft bill submitted by feminist organisations nationally in 2004. The new law recognises domestic violence to include physical, mental, emotional, financial and sexual abuse against women in domestic relationships. It offers women rights currently unavailable to them in domestic violence situations, including right to matrimonial home, custody of children in domestic violence cases and compensation from the perpetrator. The law includes all women living in domestic relationships, including mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law.

## CONCLUSION

The guidelines seem to be influenced in part by feminist understandings of women's representations, as they are based on ideas of equal rights of women within the family and outside it. However, there seems to be an implicit belief that 'good taste' and 'decency' are part of a value system commonly shared. In actuality, the implementation of the code has been left to bureaucrats, who implement the code in very rare cases. Thus there is a vast difference on how a theory is looked at in the west and how it is perceived and experienced in the Indian milieu.



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