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The Era of Post-Structuralism and Gender Discourse

Peeyush^a

N. Rama Devi Murru^{b*}

ABSTRACT

This article aims to understand post-structuralism and its contribution to framing a discourse around gender studies. Methods of poststructuralism can be very useful in the detailed study of gender. The concept of gender which was considered profound and essential was later shattered by poststructuralist thinkers. Post-Structuralism sought to undo, the hierarchical opposition between men and women, it tries to dissociate the attached notion of sex and gender. Apart from the relationship between feminism and poststructuralism, the focus of the paper will also be on the newly emerging discipline of Masculinity Studies. This paper tries to analyze the social construction of what it means to “be a man.” Post-structuralism can be used to mark the invisibility of masculinity in academic terms as “a significant absence.” Precisely it is unmarked because it is taken to be the norm and not thought about unless in opposition to something. This article provides entry point for how poststructuralist theory can be used at practical level to understand the ideas related to masculinities.

Keywords: Gender, feminism, poststructuralism.

INTRODUCTION

The general term “poststructuralism” refers to a range of critical approaches that developed after the 1960s which took from structuralism

its insight into language as a system of signs, and the construction of identity. However, it rejected the centrality of structure and the use of binary oppositions. The era of post-structuralism embraces the deconstructive operations of

^a Research Scholar, Department of Indian and World Literature, The English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad.

^{b*} Department of Indian and World Literature, The English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad.

*E-mail: peeyusharyan9471@chowgules.ac.in

Derrida, the French philosopher who began to unravel the theory of opposition. All these laid greater emphasis on the operation of ideology and power in the construction of human subjectivity, which the thinkers described in terms of gender, economy, etc. They developed a new way of thinking about differences and identities that are anti-essentialism, i.e., they do not believe in essential common characteristics which are inherent, innate, and unchanging. It argues that in order to understand an object, one must study both the object and the system of knowledge that produces the object. Writers whose work is often characterized as post-structuralist includes Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, etc. Post-structuralism has several branches, one among them is post-structural feminism which talks about the "contingent and discursive nature of all identities" (Randall, p.116). They talk about the social construction of gender and argues that there is no universal category of "women" or "man". They explore the impact of language, power relations, etc. on gender. Major figure in this category includes Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, etc.

POST-STRUCTURALISM AND GENDER STUDIES

Gender studies have its root partly in feminist theory, and it was till the 1980s that people associated it with the western enterprise. Then came lesbian critics such as Bonnie Zimmerman who attacked this assumption that there are some other female identities having different races, class, and sexuality. A more radical approach such as queer theory emerged in the 1990s. In the same year, Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble* came which presented all gender as a cultural performance. Other theorists like Diana Fuss, and Eve Sedgwick tried to deconstruct the

absolute distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The post-Structuralist theory believes that language and identity are fluid and so can gender identity. The concerns and premises of post-structuralism, namely discourse, power, instability, representation, etc., have a direct application to gender studies. In this, we try to focus on the meaning which lies deep within or behind. The meaning which might not seem immediately apparent or might not seem to correspond to a visible sign. The structuralist method somehow supports the effective functioning of patriarchy in society. "For a male-dominated society, man is the founding principle and women the excluded opposite of this; and as long as the distinction is tightly held in place the whole system can function effectively." (Eagleton, p114 - p115). Feminist theories have a major contribution to the development of discourses around masculinities. "Masculinity Studies emerges from a conversation with feminism rather than either political activism that equates to feminist endeavor or as a reaction against the historical experiences of oppression" (Srivastava, 2015). Thus, the new theoretical technique of post-structuralism enabled people to see how the majority of the human race was marginalized based on sex, gender, and sexuality.

MASCULINITY: A SIGNIFICANT ABSENCE

In Masculinities studies, we study the social role related to men and the meaning of masculinity. It focuses on various ways in which men are privileged as well as the cost of those privileges. It also emphasizes the hierarchy among men, and not all men get equal privileges which bring the question of sexuality, gender constructs, and the complex social constructs associated with biologically male people. Poststructuralism has enabled us to speak against the gender lessness

of man and presents man as a gendered being. Stephen Whitehead talked about the categories in masculinities first, the sex role theory, then structural perspectives in conjunction with hegemony theory, and post-perspectives. The presence of the word "role" in the categorization clearly signifies the fragile bond between male and masculinity. "The idea of masculinity can shift and sway with the language that we choose to construct our identity around" (Foucault and Rabinow 2010). French theorist Roland Barthes writes, the unmarked term is not simply and purely an absence of meaning, he calls it a "significant absence". Though the term is unmarked but its silence speaks a lot.

As a poststructuralist would believe that there is no inherent meaning of the sign, and meaning depends on what we understand of it, similarly one might say that masculinity has no inherent meaning of its own and its meaning is largely dependent on what we understand of it in our own cultural framework. There is a lot of work that goes on to keep us being a man and being a woman but apparently, the smallest thing can shake this construction, e.g., a large bearded masculine-looking man and wearing a skirt is such a threat to social normalcy which shows that superficiality of such construct. A student named Mikel Gomez was expelled and referred to psychologists after wearing a skirt to a school in the UK. There are several other constructs related to the idea of masculinity and one construct can be used to subvert the dominance of the other. For instance, if the idea of masculinity is associated with involving in physical labor, and hard work then the male school teacher might be considered as feminine for physical laborers and factory workers. On the other hand, if it is associated with earning and getting more paid than the daily wage laborers might be seen as feminine in comparison to the school teacher, male professors, etc. There

are various other grounds on which the relation between man and masculinity can be dissociated, how can the concept of masculinity be considered naturally related to man when we all know the possibility of female masculinity, even women can be altered to acquire masculinity hormonally? It proves that such traits are not associated directly with biological sex. There is not just an absence of discourse on masculinity, even the concept of violence is absent from this construct. Violence aimed at males is less of an issue than that targeted at women because it is assumed that men will be able to take that violence, and they do take them without expressing them. "It might be tempting to try to resolve the question of whether men make war or wars make men" (Edley, p 139). In our society, several issues are directly related to the concept of masculinity namely violence, war, sexism, rape, homophobia, etc. yet it is ignored by the people. Not just ignored, in fact virile, masculine men are often presented as heroes by various agencies

CONCLUSION

Deconstruction of the idea of masculinity is important and poststructuralist theory might help men to understand the way their identity is often formed by unrealistic societal expectations which stops one from sharing one's emotions. "Manhood" is not inevitable but has often been acquired through a series of interpolations involving "both bribe and trauma" (Stoltenberg 1998,146). Separation of masculinity from man is urgently needed as it kills the original essence of an individual. Those men who choose to give up their privileges recognize that the gains are so much more, then the pressure on them to be a man is much less. They are free from being a man who is expected to provide, to be hard, etc. this leads to the realization that what is produced as privilege is often not a privilege.

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