

# CRITICAL AWARENESS

AN APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY

**Critical Awareness: An Approach to Literary Criticism and Theory** is a study guide to revisit the basic tenets of Literary Criticism and Theory. It is a re-studying and analysis of Classical Literary Criticism and Modern Literary Theories by some of our contemporary literary scholars, who have, through their understanding, redefined and simplified the basic elements of Criticism and Theory in Literature.

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ANTHOLOGY AND REFERENCE BOOK OF  
RESEARCH ARTICLES ON LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

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# Postcolonial Feminism: A Critique of Western Representation

Dr. Fatima Sahrish

## ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to study the issue of power and patriarchal subjugation of the Third World women who are doubly marginalised since they are caught in the clutches of native patriarchy as well as foreign masculinist-imperialist ideology, exploited in the name of culture and tradition. It aims at theorising the differences of the 'other' (third world) women where the dominant trope is associated with both postcolonial and women as 'margin'.

**Keywords:** Double marginalization, Periphery, Subaltern, Postcolonial feminism

(Western) Feminism split into 'feminisms' and evolved in three waves. The first wave challenged the marginal status of women and claimed that women are equal to men. The second wave shifted its focus to the critique of sexual difference. The third wave critiqued the first world feminists for ignoring the differences between women in terms of race, class or sexuality. The fourth wave is online which is referred to as the cyber feminism.

Feminism in India started in the nineteenth century and was ironically initiated by men. Later women also joined the movement. There are three phases of Indian feminism. In the first phase, men initiated the cause of women. It began from 1850 and continued up to 1915. Raja Ram Mohan Roy came forward to eradicate the evil practice of Sati, to permit widow remarriage and to prohibit child marriage, to reduce the level of illiteracy and to assure women of their property rights through legal reforms. But the pro-women reforms were derailed by the intervention of the Nationalist Movement which started to rise in the late nineteenth century.

The second phase of Indian Feminism emerged from 1915 to 1947. During this period Nationalism became the most important issue and the desire to wipe out colonialism began to rise. It was Mahatma Gandhi who encouraged women to join the non-violent Civil Disobedience Movement against the British. The sacrificial and tolerant attitudes of women took a backseat and they were encouraged to enter the public sphere.

It was during the 70s that feminists started raising their voice against gender inequality. They wanted to be paid for their work and were reluctant to provide free to men as they were considered cheap capital and protested against unequal wages in the work sphere. The focus of Indian feminists' during the early 20th century was to attain autonomy and to be 'new women'. They wanted to have the power of freedom to make their own choices.

Feminism is certainly not a recent innovation but it will exist and flourish till the world ends. The existence of inhuman practices of sati, female infanticide, child marriage and the problems of female education in India made a mark on the minds of Indian women which lead them to think cultural stereotypes as barbaric and savage. 'Third World' feminists focus on the reality of cultural difference rather than the issue of sexual difference.

The idea of free India seems to be a myth because some of its women are still not free and they are still being relegated to the margin. India is a land of strict conventions and cultural traditions where women of weaker section are kept strictly within the four walls and are meant to play reproductive functions. Surprisingly, they accept their sufferings as their destiny due to being illiterate and remain submissive.

Even though India has attained progress to an extent, still women in India have not achieved the right place and their status is low as compared to men. The ground reality is that women of lower strata are uneducated, malnourished, victim of child-marriage, wife-beating and slavery. Every household in India has a female of around 14 years as a domestic worker who gets married at the age of 15. There are some cultural-specific issues within India that needed to be fought like the underprivileged uneducated women still have the same poor condition working as housekeeper or doing menial jobs for their living. India has its own particular problems of tradition and modernity and its specific religious and community identities which lend it an identity different from that of Western feminism.

Postcolonial feminism was inspired by postcolonial theory and it emerged in the 1980s when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked 'Can the subalterns speak?' She addresses third world women as Subaltern which means voiceless women who are out of hegemonic powers. Thus, the Postcolonial Indian Women writers retorted by not only speaking but by asserting their individuality as well. The mainstream feminist theory focused solely on the experiences of White women speaking English so postcolonialist feminists criticized them for neglecting others. It critiques feminist theorists of 'First World' and argues that women of non-western countries have been overlooked and that they are only defined by their gender ignoring race and social class.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty also holds an important place like Spivak since she called women round the world to gain a sense of sorority. Mohanty in her article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse* expresses that Western feminists overlooked complex history, variety and subject position of third world women. Nawal El Saadawi, Kumari Jayawardana, Sara Suleri, Uma Narayan are some of the prominent postcolonial feminists. In this context,

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park identify two key issues for ‘postcolonial feminism’- representation, and the questions of setting or locale... When “Third World Women” speak in the voices of these feminists, it is to repudiate otherness, tokenism, stereotyping, exceptionalism, and the role of “native informant”. They seek to resignify the attributes of Third World women – silence, the veil, absence and negativity, for instance” (qtd. in Mishra 131).

Both feminism and postcolonialism are concerned with the question of marginality. The colonized native and the woman are both marginalized figures. They share common things: they both have an enemy; they display a tone of anger and an acute sense of historical wrong; and they demand a new historiography. Postcolonial feminism like deconstructive theory demolished ‘common experience’ of whites. The problems of Indian women are at the heart of postcolonial feminists, since their problems are different from white women in a sense that Indian women also suffer racism and exploitation.

Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford talk of ‘a double colonization’ of women. Women are double colonized on the grounds of victims of colonial representations and oppressed by patriarchy. Trinh T.Minh-ha, a Vietnamese writer suggests that First World Feminists have excluded the concerns of Third World women just as men have traditionally excluded and subordinated women. Lata Mani argued that the innermost issues for women’s progress were education, widow remarriage, child marriage etc. The definitions of Hindu tradition became controversial and women who were burned were marginal as stated:

Rajan and Mani have analysed the debate on the abolition of *sati* to locate female subjectivity in colonial India...Mani reveals how between these discourses, women were ‘neither subjects nor objects, but rather the ground of the discourse on *sati*’ (117)... In an attempt to assign an active subject position to women in *sati*, Rajan calls the practice ‘*sati-as-burning*’ rather than ‘*sati-as-death*’ (Mukhopadhyay 93)

Violence against women and marginalization helped women to raise their voice against sufferings. Indian Women writers insist that women have to speak a different language in order to come to the centre from the periphery. They refuse to be bound by patriarchy and attempt to expand the margins assigned to them. It is the need of the hour to become independent and society should understand that an earning lady has an extra attribute if she is educated. In today’s world women want to live like a partner with their partners and not merely as servants without any emotional intimacy. They want their social, cultural and economic rights, performing their biological and traditional roles simultaneously. Postcolonial feminists wish for women’s liberation from the status of subaltern.

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