Lecture 29

Feminism and Literature I: Mary Wollstonecraft

Hello everyone and welcome back to a new lecture in this series on literary theory. In our last lecture we have completed discussing psychoanalysis and today we are going to move on to the topic of feminism and how it relates to literary studies? Now feminism is a much maligned term and Margaret Walters in her book *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* devotes the whole of her first chapter to trace the long history of opposition to the term "feminism". Interestingly, as Walters shows, this opposition does not merely come from people who are opposed to the idea of equality of women but also from people like Virginia Woolf, whose works are regarded as central to contemporary feminist theory. The problem with dealing with a theoretical term that is so regularly vilified is that we end up with a purely negative category – a blank, or perversion, a lack – which becomes difficult to study in itself. So one of the first things that we need to do here is to try and fix some sort of a positive definition of feminism as a theoretical category which can then act as our basis for further exploration.

I think a good definition of feminism is provided by Chris Weedon at the very beginning of her book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Weedon writes:

> Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we become.

This definition is particularly good because by explaining feminism in terms of resistance to patriarchy it reveals feminism in its full scope. So just as patriarchy is ubiquitous and structures all areas of life, feminist resistance to it is also equally ubiquitous. But for a lecture series like ours this very ubiquity poses a problem. If feminism pervades every aspect of our life that is structured by patriarchy, then how do we even start studying it? How do we find the beginning of feminism? How do we trace its history? What social, cultural, political or economic context do we locate it within?

Since these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered with the help of Weedon's definition, let us move on to a narrower definition of the term which we find in *Oxford English Dictionary*. After defining feminism as a movement associated with the advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of political, social, and economic rights of the female sex, the dictionary adds a note, which is very important for our purpose. The note reads:

> The issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th cent., with regard especially to property rights, the marriage relationship, and the right to vote. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th cent. that there was significant political change. A 'second wave' of feminism arose in the 1960s, concerned especially with economic and social discrimination, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood. A more diverse 'third wave' is sometimes considered to have arisen in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against the perceived lack of focus on class and race issues in earlier movements.

Now, this particular definition and the note accompanying, though it lacks the kind of comprehensiveness offered by Weedon's definition, makes up for it in terms of practical

usefulness by providing us with some definite spatial and temporal coordinate for feminism. According to this definition, feminism, as it is popularly understood, is a cluster of movements for women's rights that can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. These movements played out in the context of the post-Enlightenment West and largely remained confined to Western Europe and America at least till the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, according to the definition, feminist movements have become more inclusive of race and class and have consequently spilled beyond the bourgeois white woman centric discourse.

Now, there are of course some obvious problems with this definition. For instance, it may be justifiably argued that this definition is too West-centric in its orientation and does not take into account the long history of movements for women's rights that took place within other socio-cultural contexts. For example, this definition does not allow us to take into account the anti-patriarchal activism of individuals like Savitribai Phule or Begum Rokeya or Tarabai Shinde or Pandita Ramabai. But then, this is a gap that haunts not just this definition but indeed how feminism is popularly understood. The mainstream discourse of feminism considers the post-Enlightenment West to be its major well spring and in this lecture series we will use this mainstream understanding of feminism. Yet, even while working with this particular West-centric definition of feminism, we should be conscious about its limitations. In fact, if you find interest in feminism, I would definitely encourage you to go beyond the confines of post-Enlightenment Western feminism and do a more exhaustive research on the different ways in which of women's rights has been advocated in different cultures and different historical eras.

So with these introductory comments about defining feminism, let's move on to study some of its major aspects. Now one way of studying feminism is by looking at the different waves of

feminist movement. But, since we have been approaching theoretical categories in this lecture series by focusing on individuals and their works, we will continue with that convention even here. So in this lecture series I will try and introduce feminism to you, of course in the more spatially and temporally limited sense of the term, through the works of three different intellectuals: Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Simone de Beauvoir.

Mary Wollstonecraft

So let us start with Mary Wollstonecraft today. Her dates are 1759 to 1797 and she was born in a middle-class English family which had fallen on bad days. In many ways her upbringing is representative of the upbringing of any girl within the middle class or lower middle class families of eighteenth-century England. Since her family had fallen to poverty, only one among the seven Wollstonecraft siblings was chosen to receive formal education. And given the patriarchal norms of the day, it is unsurprising that neither Mary nor any of her sisters were chosen for this privilege. Rather it was her brother Edward who was deemed the most suitable for formal education simply by the virtue of his being a boy. Now, here, let me briefly stop to clarify the term patriarchy. I am sure it is very well understood in general but, nevertheless, here is a definition of the term which I have borrowed from the same book of Chris Weedon from which I had quoted a few moments ago. As per Weedon,

> The term patriarchal refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. […]. In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male.

I will not try to elaborate on this definition because its assertions are lucid enough and known enough to be understood clearly. So let's move on with Wollstonecraft's life.

Though Wollstonecraft did not receive any formal education, she was thought to read and write and became an autodidact or a self-taught person from quite early in her life. In contemporary England the occupations that were available to a gentlewoman were severely limited, and constituted primarily of being a governess or a companion to a lady or a teacher to young children. Mary Wollstonecraft tried out most of these occupations during her life time but she really came on her own when her publisher friend and patron Joseph Johnson offered her the role of a contributor in his *Analytical Review*. One of the chief disappointments of Wollstonecraft's life was her relationship with the American merchant Gilbert Imlay with whom she was passionately in love and had a child named Fanny outside of the wedlock. After her separation with Imlay, Wollstonecraft married the English journalist and radical philosopher William Goldwin. And on August 1797 she gave birth to a daughter who would be known to history as Mary Shelley, the author of the famous novel *Frankenstein*. Wollstonecraft however died shortly after giving birth to her daughter thereby bringing to an end one of the most exemplary lives led by a woman in the eighteenth century.

During her comparatively brief life span, Mary Wollstonecraft was able to produce a significant amount of writings which included fiction but also, more importantly, socio-political treatise which would question some of the fundamental aspects of her contemporary society. The best known among these treatises is titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* which was published in 1792. It is widely regarded as one of the earliest tracts of modern feminism and its main thrust was to put forward the idea of women as rational subjects. Now we will have to come back to this idea of women as rational subjects later on. But before that I would like to dwell a little on

the qualifier “earliest” that I have used to describe Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.*

Now if we are looking for treatises extolling the role of women in society within the context of the Western world, then the year 1792, which saw the publication of *Vindication*, is actually a rather late date. For instance, we already find a full-fledged polemic written in English and discussing the superiority of women over men as early as 1589. This was a tract written by Jane Anger and published under the title *Protection for Women*. It makes the interesting argument that Eve is better and purer than Adam because Eve is made not from the dust of the ground as the latter but from the flesh and bones of Adam. Now as is evident from this particular argument mobilized to elevate the status of women, such early feminist texts that preceded Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* were all using various interpretations of *The Bible* to make their point. *The Bible* in turn provided these early advocates of woman’s superiority with a number of significant women figures whom they could evoke to make their argument, beginning with Mary the mother of Jesus to Mary Magdalene who repented for her sins to Jesus. The use of these Christian figures and *The Bible* to promote the status of women is understandable in a theocentric society where all major social and political arguments are god driven. But the spirit of Enlightenment that swept through Europe during the eighteenth century brought about a paradigm shift. Divinity was replaced by rationality as the key argument underlying human social and political life. And this ideological rephrasing of man’s position within the socio-political matrix was most decisively acted out on the world stage in the form of two revolutions.

The first was the American Revolution that took place between 1765 and 1783 and the second was the French Revolution which started in 1789 and then went on to unseat the Bourbon monarchy in the 1790s. Both these revolutions produced two very significant documents –

United States Declaration of Independence, and *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* – which undermined the earlier belief in a divinely ordained hierarchical society and established a new idea of man's place in the society based on principles of rationality. Thus for instance the Declaration of Independence asserts that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". Note here, that though the divine creator is evoked here, the basic rights of man are regarded as self-evident truths. This means that they are truths that are understandable by the application of common sense rationality and does not require any reference to the divine for justification.

Mary Wollstonecraft, with her treatise on vindication of woman's rights tries to intervene in this changed scenario and foreground the woman not with reference to theology but with reference to rationality. She tries to place woman on the same platform of rationality that the contemporary discourse of human rights and political citizenship was placing man on to. So in other words Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is an attempt to extend the discourse of rights which was otherwise centred on man, on to the figure of the woman. This was a novel effort which in a way started what we understand as modern feminism. And this is why I have referred to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* as one of the earliest tracts of modern feminism.

Now coming to the actual arguments contained in the *Vindication.* Wollstonecraft asserts that women by the virtue of being humans are as rational as men and therefore as much a claimant of natural rights as men. If their status as rational subjects is at all denied, then it is denied by men who do so without consulting the women. This in itself is a sign not only of injustice but also of tyrannical irrationality. To quote Wollstonecraft's words:

> When men fight for their freedom, fight to be allowed to judge for themselves concerning their own happiness, isn't it inconsistent and unjust to hold women down? […] [W]ho made man the exclusive judge of that if woman shares with him the gift of reason?

Here, Wollstonecraft does away with the question "whether women are rational or not?" In its place she asks another question, which is "who says women are irrational?" And then she goes on to show that any statement regarding women's irrationality is itself made from a position that is inconsistent and unjust.

Wollstonecraft, however, agrees that women *appear* to be ignorant, lazy, and irresponsible within society. But she argues that that is not because of any inherent lack of rationality in them. Rather, it is because they were denied proper education by their fathers and because any exercise of their reasoning faculty is looked down upon by society at large as "unfeminine". Wollstonecraft's suggestion is therefore to completely overhaul the education system for women that would allow them to emerge as fully rational beings who are at par with men. But she is also aware that it requires more than the change of heart of individual patriarchs about the education of their daughters to establish women as rational beings. This is because, Wollstonecraft argues that both men and women were ultimately "educated in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society". And the notion of femininity is too deeply rooted within the patriarchal society to allow women to emerge on the socio-political arena as rational citizens. She therefore advocates that the society itself should be radically transformed so as to "bring about a revolution in female manners".

In the next lecture we will see how these early pronouncements of women's rights is rephrased and rearticulated by the feminists of the twentieth century. Thank you for listening.