

A Literary Perspective on Gender Theory

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses a literary perspective on gender theory or studies that argue the issues of gender and sexuality. The issues of gender assumed as a crucial position in the critical and creative writing. In the contemporary academic studies, gender theory is one of the significant areas of study in various branches and fields, such as literary theory, drama, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literature. The paper argues a perspective on the major literary issues in the gender's socio-cultural context. Indeed, gender theory is one of the most debated and debatable theory that shock the perspective and the writing of scholars in the 21st century literary world. The study tried to bring in the literature and gender theory into discussions of sexual diversity and gender identity in the light of critical or literary perspective. The theory also exposes the several issues of the patriarchal perspectives in the gender equality context. As a matter of critical discourses, gender criticism questions the differing or contradictory conceptions of gender and their role in the writing, reception, subject matter, and evaluation of literary works. Therefore, the paper is an endeavor to focus the literary and critical key issues of gender theory.

Keywords: Gender, literary perspective, identity, culture and theory.

With the emergence of postmodernism and critical theory, the problems and issues of gender and sexuality are a central position in the critical and creative writing. Gender theory, cultural studies, racial and ethnic discourses have given these

issues altogether a different intellectual and academic status in the world. Gender theory began to develop during the 1980s in feminist thought in the field of historical anthropology, philosophy, psychology and natural sciences. It marked a shift from the women-centered investigations of the 1970's to the study of gender relations involving both men and women. It was believed that the study would have a radically transformative impact on literary studies. Joan W. Scott, a historian, noted that the theory of gender tends to universalize the category was promoted by feminists precisely to criticize and reject the traditional efforts to define women nature through the biological sex. Social scientists and literary theorists like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jane Flax and many other radical feminists who have addressed themselves to the sufferings and of women in a patriarchal system. The issue of gender is one of the significant areas of study in various branches and fields, such as literary theory, drama, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, and literature.

Before an extensive discussion on the major literary issues of gender theory, it is a need to define the gender and its theory. General usage of the term, gender began in the late 1960s and 1970s, increasingly appearing in the professional literature of the social sciences. The term helps us in distinguishing aspects of life that were more easily attributed or understood to be of social rather than biological origin. (Diamond, 2005: 124) According to Aristotle, the Greek philosopher Protagoras used the terms masculine, feminine, and neuter to classify nouns, introducing the concept of grammatical gender. At least since the 14th century, the word is also used to indicate male or female qualities. (Wikipedia: 2016) It is a collective belief that every living being born with a gender identity on the earth. In that sense, gender is the concept used to identify a human being as a male, a female or an intersex. Traditionally, it uses to highlight the social distinctions between men and women; such as the

positions they occupy, the roles they play and the social status they have, are socially constructed and apportioned in a society. The renowned scholars, Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (2004) define gender in their book entitled, *Key Concept in Cultural Theory* gender as in the following way:

‘Gender’ is typically placed in opposition the concept of ‘sex’. While our sex (female/ male) is a matter of biology (feminine/masculine) and is a matter of culture. Gender may, therefore, be taken to refer to learned patterns of behaviour and action, as opposed to that which is biologically determined. Crucially, biology need not be assumed to determine gender. This is to suggest that while what makes a person male or female is universal and grounded in laws of nature, the precise ways in which women express their femininity and man express their masculinity will vary from culture to culture.(Edgar and Sedgwick: 2004:158)

Nevertheless, there are so many social aspects and milieus exaggerate the gender social identities and status in the society. As in the socio-lingo context, Microsoft Encarta Dictionary has defined gender as, traditionally, gender has referred to grammatical classifications in languages, and sex has referred to the biological classifications to which gender is analogous. For some time, however, anthropologists have used gender to distinguish cultural categories from biological ones: Gender roles are indistinct among the young of this society; the two sexes play together frequently. A contemporary gender theorist, Michel Foucault in his book *History of Sexuality* has made an intrepid thesis that sexuality, generally believed to be natural as well as a private intimate matter is completely constructed in culture, depending on the political aims of the dominant class of society. This explains why women have taken up different stances in gender and sexual practices and identities like celibacy, lesbianism, feminism, antifeminism and other. The critiques of all discourses concerning gender continue to be an important aspect of feminism. Foucault dose not overtly discuss femininity in his writings, but his practice is usefully illustrated

in, for example, his discussions of sexuality. Foucault (1976), has discussed in *The History of Sexuality* about the truth of sex as,

The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth.(Foucault, 1976: 56)

The terms, sex, and gender are two different concepts such as sex is a biological condition of human being or we can also say that living being whereas gender is a social and cultural concept that is based on the sex of human begin. In fact, cultural and biological categories are interrelated, of course, and thus, at times, it can be difficult to decide which word is more appropriate. Gender has become the preferred form in the 21st century, as in gender is an important factor to consider when hiring new employees and in idiomatic expressions such as gender-gap. (MED: 2006). In fact, Gender is a representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation. The cultural conceptions of male and female are two complementary, yet mutually exclusive categories into which all human beings are placed. This constitutes a gender system is closely connected with the political and social factors in each society. In 1990, Judith Butler published *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of Identity*. In this piece of research, she disputed that the gender is not an innate or essential identity, but a contingent and variable constructed that mandates a “performance”—that is, a particular set of practices, which an individual acquires from the discourse of his social era and strives to enact.

On the other hand, the gender identity of a nation is one of the burning issues of gender study in India. Indif, an online information hub has stated the ‘mother India’ concepts as, ‘Bharat Mata, that is, the Mother India (*Bharat—India, Mata—Mother*) is a personification of India, and relatively seen by some as a mother goddess of fertility. She is usually depicted as a lady,

clad in a saree holding a flag.' The people take the country or the nation as a feminine gender and henceforth, the people call it 'Bharat Mata' (*Mother India*). If the country for us is a motherland, for others cultural perspective, it will be a fatherland. However, there are so many questions in the mind of Indian people about the gender identity of the nation. On the event of a lecture series in the memory of late historian Bipan Chandra at Jawaharlal Nehru University, the newspaper, *The Hindu*, has quoted a veteran and renowned historian, Irfan Habib lecture about the notion of 'Bharat Mata' as, "Bharat Mata has nothing to do with India's ancient or medieval past. It is a European import. Notions of motherland and fatherland were talked about in Europe," Later, talking to *The Hindu* on the sidelines of the event, Prof. Habib elaborated on his statement. "Bharat is mentioned in ancient India. It was first used in an inscription of King Kharavela in Prakrit. But there presentation of the country in human form as a mother or father was unknown in ancient India or medieval India," he said. "This was an idea that emerged in Europe with the rise of nationalism, and it was found in Britain, Russia, etc. "He added that *Madar-e-Watan* in Urdu was also a case of the European idea being borrowed (Pathak, 2016, March 29). The notion of nation's gender identity is a matter of introspection. Certainly, the gendered representation of a nation is a matter of gender studies that should be discussed in a thorough scholarly research work.

Moreover, from a literary perspective, the concept of gender has made it possible for feminists to simultaneously explain and delegitimize the presumed homology between biological and social sex differences constituted as human subjects that they inhabit experience and construct ways. Even though in separation, both men and women are prisoners of gender system. All over the world, gender is also one of the factors of domination in the society. A new perception and understanding of gender and of the heretofore suppressed feminine dimensions of public and private life have taken roots in recent years.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous thesis, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir, 1982:2). It means one acquires and identifies with a status of female, not through the physical maturation of role behaviours but through the experience of sexuality, a complex unity of physical and emotional identity and status. As a biological characteristic, sexuality determines gender. Certainly, Gender issues take place out of the relationships between men and women and its impact on their roles, privileges, status and position in society and literary creation. Even the construction of language has been changed according to gender-to-gender. In reality, the gender studies always examine and raises the issues of how sexual identity influences on literary works.

The current trends in gender studies incorporate terms of deconstruction, therefore questioning the entire notion of an established gender identity. Gender is of course "constructed" through a number of interacting elements within a societal system. As we known, the gender studies started by an American literary theorist, Judith Butler. Butler approach of gender identity in a manner reminiscent of deconstruction explaining meaning in language. The central concept is "gender construction" according to which "man" and "woman" adopt the role of signifiers whose meaning or identity is construed through an interdependent structure of other signifiers. (Mario, 2004: 97-98) Besides, the object of analysis in gender studies is no longer the female only, but rather the relations between the genders. An increasing number of male critics are now working on gender issues and problems, thus integrating masculinity into gender studies. In accord with these latest developments, the role of male and female homosexuality in literature and literary criticism receives a great deal of attention.

Initially, Gender study is an offshoot of feminist movements. The term, gender is a very multifaceted concept and

has the eternal burning issue of societies in around the world. Therefore, the issue of gender is an axis point of feminist writers and theorists. As we know that women's writing has passed through different phases over the centuries moving from imitation, through protest, to a definition of self. Women's writing defines and traces the connection throughout history and across national boundaries of the recurrent images, themes, plots that arise from women's social, psychological and aesthetic experience in countries around the world. These experiences are reflected the gender consciousness in their writing and their works. According to Jane Flax, a theorist, says, "The problematization of gender relationship is a feminist theory." (Flax: 1987:627)

Conversely, women writers have realized the need to document female convictions and other civic and domestic structure of power. The intellectual trajectory of a female aesthetic has taken a turn, from a concentration on women's literary subordination and exclusion to women's separate literary tradition. Such as novels written by women attempts to construct a novel's form within the women's position using details from their own personal experience. Women novelist and poets have moved on to include the political and the social status of women in the society. Women writers have traced questions like what does it mean to be philosophical or politically positioned as a woman. Who is she and where does she stand? Are women writer outsiders in a social and cultural system due to their gendered positions? Does the women writer experience her gender as a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequate? Without any doubt, these interrogations have raised the major issues of women position in the society and literature.

As a literary study, Gender criticism is a very multi-dimensional and multifaceted job in the present contemporary literary world. Because a gender critic cannot take one side, they must have to take a balancing judgment and perspective for a

male, a female or an intersex. M. H. Abraham (2007) defines gender criticism in a very lucid comprehensible way in his book *Glossary of Literary Terms* as:

Gender criticism, like the gender studies of which it is a part, is based on the premise that while sex (a person's identification as male or female) is determined by anatomy, gender (masculinity or femininity in personality traits and behavior) can be largely independent of anatomy, and is a social construction that is diverse, variable, and dependent on historical circumstances. Gender criticism analyses differing conceptions of gender and their role in the writing, reception, subject matter, and evaluation of literary works. (Abraham: 2007:113)

Furthermore, Gender criticism plays a vital role in the social reformation in the contemporary world. It is an obvious (and sometimes contentious) overlap with feminist criticism, gay studies, and lesbian studies. The distinguishing attribute of gender studies has come to be their special attention to the role of males and the conceptions of masculinity that in the course of social, political, and artistic history. The contradiction between gender and sex is a central argument to gender criticism. So many critics consider sex is associated with a biological reproduction, whereas gender is a notion of masculinity and femininity. Likewise, gender is a social and a cultural construct while sex is biological. However, and more importantly, Gender critics reject the view that gender is a natural and on the other hand, they take it as a social construct, 'a learned behaviour, a product of culture and its institutions.' To put it in a plain language, it may say that the gender critics are constructionists who view gender as a cultural construct.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her essay, "Gender Criticism" (1992) argues that gender criticism, unlike feminist criticism, is, 'not criticism through the categories of gender' but a 'criticism of them.' Another gender critic Teresa de Lauretis discoursed that a gender is 'the product of various social technologies, such as cinema,' rather than, 'a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings.' In other words, gender is

not the biological sexual difference; it is a construct, 'a product of language, culture, and its institutions.' Feminist and gender criticism are not polar opposites. Gender criticism is not a woman-centered but sees male and female sexes, the masculine and feminine genders, in terms of a complicated continuum. (Das: 2007, 150)

In this paper, of course, is not possible to argue or discuss the entire issues of gender theory however from the above discussion it can be comprehended as an identity of gender is socially and culturally constructed in the world. In Gender criticism, the term "gender" is used to refer the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities. It does not refer to a biological difference, but rather than a cultural difference. The gender conventions play a large role in attributing masculine and feminine characteristics to a fundamental biological sex. Without a doubt, the issues of gender arose out of the relationships between men, women, and its impact on their roles, privileges, statuses and positions in society. Actually, what culture we practice that frequently pronounce our sex differences by using the cultural grammar of gender. It cannot negate that the concept of gender is a rhetorical and linguistic construction. The socio-cultural codes and conventions, the rules by which society functions, and which are both a creation of society as well as a constituting element of it, determine the allocation of these specific behaviours to the sexes. These behaviours provide the foundations for the creation of hegemonic gender difference. It follows then, that gender can be assumed as the acquisition and internalization of social behaviours. Individuals are, therefore, socialized through their receipt of society's expectations of 'acceptable' gender attributes, which are flaunted within institutions such as the family, the state and the media. Such a concept of 'gender' then become naturalized into a person's sense of self or identity, effectively imposing a gendered social category upon a sexed body.

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