

A Study of Theoretical Strands of Post Feminism

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Abstract

Theoretical strands of postfeminism featuring within academic have been informed by both postmodern and feminist analyses together with the complexities inherent in postmodern feminism. An understanding of postfeminism clarifies its pluralistic and anti-foundationalist tendencies which become instrumental in rejecting the notion of a universal and singular conception of woman, and replacing it with the differences that exist between women. This emphasis on difference and individualism links postfeminism to its more popular manifestations. The debates around postmodern feminism largely centre on the problem of subjectivity as the focal point of concentration and division, Susan Hekman has referred to this as the distinction between the constituting self of the humanist/modern tradition and its constituted postmodern counterpart.

Introduction

The idea of the subject has been of a vital importance to postmodern theories as one that is located within power structure and subjected to several discursive formulations. As a conceptual category, the postmodern subject is fluid rather than stable, constructed rather than fixed, contested rather than secure, multiple rather than uniform and deconstructed rather than whole as opposed to the autonomous agent identified as an integral component of modernity. In effect, as suggested by Susan Hekman postmodern thinking problematizes the concept of the constituting subject of the Cartesian tradition, along with the notions of agency, creativity and resistance, and instead stresses the discursive construction and the constituted nature of the individual. Fredric Jameson refers to this deconstructive attack as ‘the death of the subject’ or ‘the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad’, whereby the spontaneous and rational self developed by Enlightenment thinkers is radically decentred and dismissed. The postmodern disintegration of the subject has been supported by feminist scholars to further their attempts in opening up the subject category of *women*. The contemporary feminist movement has largely been informed by postmodernism’s rejection of a subject-centred epistemology of modernity in order to gain the potential to establish a cultural politics of diversity. Feminists reject the philosophical notion of a transcendent subject that is devoid of any contingencies of difference. The feminist critique nurtures a distrust of modern theory and politics that has devalued women’s subject positions, and in doing so neglected concerns that have been central. As Best and Kellner have maintained that feminists have been suspicious of modernity ... because the oppression of women has been sustained and legitimated on account of the philosophical undercurrents of modern theory and its essentialism, foundationalism and universalism. The principal thrust of the feminist argument being that the subject has been conceived as inherently masculine, which has been a significant factor in maintaining the inferior status of women. In

its gendered conceptualisation of the subject category the humanist discourse of *man* covertly supports and justifies male domination of women as it upholds a binary opposition between the sexes, impersonated by two opposite sets of characteristics that position *man* as the voice of reason and objectivity while enslaving *woman* in domestic activities and excluding her from public life. Susan Hekman too has pointed out that unless the masculine subject is reconstructed, 'the subjection of women that it fosters will necessarily continue.

It has thus been observed that there are profound similarities and affinities between postmodern and feminist attacks on universalism, foundationalism and dichotomous thinking, with postmodernism providing philosophical support to feminism and other social movements. As Best and Kellner point out, 'the postmodern emphasis on plurality, difference and heterogeneity has had immense appeal to those who have found themselves marginalized and excluded from the voice of Reason, Truth and Objectivity'. As critiques of modernity, feminism and postmodernism do not accept the claims of Enlightenment philosophy in regard to concepts of knowledge, subjectivity and forms of social domination. In fact, 'feminism encourages postmodern theory to critique of the humanist conception of universal *man* as a discourse of male domination, thereby giving rise to a more differentiated analysis of the production of subjects in terms of gender identities.

Despite the stand taken by feminists following the postmodern ideal that leads to a deconstruction of the hegemonic systems through a rejection of epistemological purity in favour of a pluralistic conception of theory, it cannot be ignored that the evocation of difference cannot be assimilated unquestioningly, as is in evidence in the case of postmodern feminism. The coming together of different epistemologies may be imagined as a mutually beneficial coalition, proceeding from a recognition of the diversity of the two entities to be combined and without the expectation of some unifying principle. In this optimistic formulation, 'the prospect of a merger... is undertaken as a way of intensifying and enhancing the value of each entity taken separately'. However, despite the optimism the intersection of feminism and postmodernism cannot be passed on as an uncomplicated communion and blending of diverse epistemological fields, but needs to be recognized as an open and intense confrontation of two multifaceted and distant contexts.

The seemingly unproblematic alliance of postmodernism and feminism often eludes over their inherent complexities. Whereas feminism is based on the notion of an autonomous and self-reflexive female subject, postmodernism is defined as a theoretical/philosophical perspective, debilitating for feminist agency and politics. Following this postmodern theory is understood to be undermining women's feminists' sense of selfhood and their capacity for resistance. Postmodernism is interpreted as an obstruction to feminists politics as its primary motivation is philosophical while feminism's primary goal is the politics of emancipation. The intersections of feminism and postmodernism cannot be conceived as an all harmonious union, but neither can they be situated within a simplistic dualism that sets feminist practice and postmodern theory in opposition to each other. Much rather their engagement should be seen as one that goes beyond a binary logic.

In fact, the rift between postmodernism and feminism is seen to be the result of two tendencies proceeding from opposite directions towards the same objective: to debunk traditional/patriarchal philosophy. Postmodernists and feminists both criticise Western concepts of Man, history and metaphysics to achieve the objective of exposing the excesses of traditional and patriarchal philosophy,

but their criticisms do not necessarily overlap. Feminism can more faithfully be described as a call to *action* that cannot stop at simply being a belief system for ‘without action, feminism is merely empty rhetoric which cancels itself out’ (Alice 12). Diametrically opposed to feminism’s commitment to action the postmodern discourse is recognized by its inherent relativism up in challenge against any univalent structure and concept.

The influence of postmodernism has thus been a limitation of political and critical intervention that feminism was in need of. Within postmodernism, the category of intention is seen to be overdetermined to the extent that subjectivity is a construct grounded on discourses and beyond all individual control. Myra Macdonald says that the question that irks women is whether they have the liberty to offer criticism as ‘women’, when the category of ‘women’ may be an essentialist, patriarchal category that denies difference within it’. When applied to feminism’s own identity as representing the interests of women, postmodernism’s fracturing of the subject poses a potential threat to feminist theory and politics as it arrests the possibility of a feminist selfhood. Postmodernism thus becomes a political liability for feminism, in as much as it challenges a unified conception of the feminist movement. The encounter of feminism and postmodernism is fraught with conceptual and practical dilemmas for, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson have questioned, ‘how can we combine a postmodernist incredulity toward meta-narratives with the social- critical power of feminism?’ The basic questions feminist critics are concerned with centralize on the issues of agency and subjectivity and are concerned with the specific nature of political action that feminists will be able to pursue when a systematic, general and theoretical accounts of the condition of women are not given. Feminist critics maintain that within postmodern deconstructionism there is no way in that it can justify generalisations about women and so dissolves the very foundations of the feminist movement. The further anxiety that feminists encounter is that the postmodern critique ‘may not only eliminate the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women’s movement’. As Toril Moi declares, ‘the price for giving in to [this] powerful discourse is nothing less than the depoliticisation of feminism [as] it will be quite impossible to argue that women under patriarchy constitute an oppressed group, let alone develop a theory of their liberation’. Postmodernism's invocation of difference and its dismissal of the constituting agent of modernity have been seen by feminism as a lapse into a self- destructive pluralism and abstract individualism. In the case of a diversification beyond any possibility of linking, critics are concerned that up in union the feminist movement would become fractured and fragmented to such an extent that it would no longer be able to represent and politically advance the interests of women. It would become a structurally disadvantaged category in relation to men and end up as a depoliticised and personalised feminism that would lose the ability of being employed as a politics of resistance or a programme for change and suffice with an individuation of its members.

What may become even more alarming, if dragged to its logical conclusion is that postmodern theory may even result in a nihilistic stance that dismantles and dismisses the subject category altogether as a mere construct. As Patricia Waugh notes, postmodernism ‘may even situate itself at a point where there is no subject and no history, as it was understood to be identity would than simply be an illusion produced through the manipulation of irreconcilable and contradictory language games’. Such a view describes Jean Baudrillard’s pessimistic position, which assumes that ‘the postmodern world is devoid of meaning; it is a universe of nihilism where theories float in a void, unanchored in any secure harbour’. According to Baudrillard, the postmodern is 'characteristic of a universe where there are no more definitions possible. It has all been done. The extreme limit of these possibilities has been reached. It has

destroyed itself. It has deconstructed its entire universe’.

Critics hold that postmodernists theoretical deconstructionism may reach a standstill for there would be a void of any faith or meaning. Through a deconstruction of subjectivity, postmodernism would be abolishing those very ideals of autonomy and accountability that are essential for the idea of historical change. Seyla Benhabib is concerned that a complete rejection of the concepts of selfhood and agency would debilitate the possibility of critical theory. Benhabib notes that postmodern views of subjectivity are incompatible with feminist politics, as they 'undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women'. She holds that such Utopian thinking is 'a practical-moral imperative', as 'without such a regulative principle of hope, not only morality but also radical, transformation is unthinkable'. She goes on to say that 'social criticism without some form of philosophy is not possible, and without social criticism the project of a feminist theory which is at once committed to knowledge and to the emancipator interests of women is inconceivable’.

In emulating the theories of the postmodern, feminists would be compelled to drop its essentializing patterns of thought that keep them together and dispense with those beliefs that keep them grounded. The category women will no longer hold true of their collective identity that is the instrument of their solidarity and voice. Cautious of the theoretical fascination that postmodernism radiates the feminist movement will need to interrogate its own foundation, forged as an inclusive, women-centred basis to strengthen its roots so as to nourish and give expression to women-centered social thought and political action. A blind following to postmodernism may not only depoliticise the feminist agenda of women's emancipation but may put an end to the social movement if the concept of woman is a fiction, then the very concept of women's oppression will become obsolete and the purpose of feminism will stand defeated. This finally leads to the 'nagging question [of] whether the uncertain promise of a political linkage between feminism and postmodernism is worth the attendant potential risks'. In its most extreme formulations of the postmodern/feminist synthesis, feminism would be entirely ingested by postmodern theory, with its uniqueness and politics of emancipation completely erased.

Feminist theorists have been cautious of being subsumed into the depths of this gesture of inclusion that arrogates of postmodernism, and argue that the postmodern condition should not be understood as a uniform phenomenon that impacting everyone in the same way. Ien Angis of the view that such totalising accounts function as the assumption that there is 'a linear, universal and radical historical transformation of the world from "modernity" to "postmodernity"'. She urges rising above the sweeping generalisations and platitudes made about postmodernism and focus on its signification as a break with modernity, 'the very dispersal of taken for granted universalist and progressivist assumptions of the modern'. The appeal is that postmodernism must question its own globalising narratives and reject a projection of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals. As Nicholson points out, postmodernism 'must insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time'. Postmodern theorizing and its call for difference must be historical, following from the demands of specific contexts, in keeping with the cultural specificity of different societies and periods.

As Patricia Waugh notes, women can only 'begin to problematize and to deconstruct the socially constructed subject positions available to them' once they have 'experienced themselves as "subjects"'. Feminism has provided its own critique of essentialist and foundationalist assumptions that is neither interchangeable nor synonymous with the postmodern deconstructive position. Postmodernism is

criticised for its gender-blindness, whereby it first assumes and then rejects relationships that women have never experienced as their own subjects. Even if, as an extreme measure women were to accept postmodern deconstructionism, 'the luxury of female anti-essentialism' could still only be accorded to the privileged, as 'non-white, non-heterosexual, non-bourgeois women still finding political impetus in summoning up womanhood as identity and femininity as a construct which excludes and punishes them most pair fully of all'. The major section of women are not in a privileged position to operate choices and turn down the politically enabling category of 'Woman', for in such an event the ground on which to stand against oppression would have been compromised.

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