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SITUATING CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM IN THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose to engage in formal theorizing of feminism thereby transcending its localized contexts. The postmodern anti-foundationalism stemming from the theses of death of man, binary and metaphysics decentres feminism and threatens to flatten all experience as celebration as the embodied 'view from everywhere'. This nihilistic and ultra-relativist position rejects the concept of a rational coherent subject and thus the enlightenment ideal of a rational pursuit of knowledge as such knowledge is achievable; making the political project of universal emancipation an utopia. Feminism and postmodernism need not, however, be at loggerheads always as I try to argue hereby a process of strategic selection that suggests common grounds for the two to reconcile differences and certain theoretical stances that rather than deconstruct offer a reconstruction of new realities while acknowledging the need to accommodate alterity. This will include real time differences in ground realities and warrant the presence of feminisms rather than a monolithic tradition of Western feminism.

Key Words: Feminism, postmodernism, Metaphysics, alterity, Local narratives

Introduction

Feminism and postmodernism share a paradoxical relationship that both inform the contentions of the two as well as threaten to undermine the claims of either. Postmodernist questioning of any claims of universal truth abets the feminist questioning of historically constructed authoritarian structures of oppression. Yet postmodernism "threatens feminism's political, emancipatory project and 'breaches the link between politics and scholarship which has formed the important

bases for the generation of feminist knowledge" (Jackson, 1998: 9). Academic feminist engagement with contemporary theory has often been problematic as it threatens to reify the accusations that extensive theorizing removes the sting from feminism resulting in the sidelining of issues of social exclusion. These fears are unfounded as experience and theory rather than constituting a dichotomy transcend such neat divisions to transcend localized contexts thereby helping to retain its critical edge and explanatory power (Jackson). I will attempt in this paper to examine the



postmodernist critique of Western metaphysics and its implications on contemporary feminist theory.

Postmodern feminist dialectics

Postmodernism's skepticism of absolute truth claims mirror feminism's remonstrance of traditional structures. Both reiterate the constructedness of knowledge emanating from specific locations. This negation of the stable, pre-social self and the dismantling of the possibility of a disembodied rationality persist in both postmodernism and feminism. These concurrences in ideas do not, however, project a happy alliance. Postmodernism can be seen to be at odds with 'the project of intellectual feminism since it undermines the attempt to understand structural inequalities: instead the world is seen as fluid and constantly shifting so that persistent inequalities of gender, class or 'race' are erased' (ibid: 9). This negates the very bases of the feminist project calling for a selective association with postmodern contentions in repudiating the foundationalism in all knowledge and accepting provisionally the human need to invest in metanarratives.

Ihab Hassan's definition of Postmodernism as an "antinomian movement that assumes a vast unmaking of the Western mind" highlights the emphasis on deconstruction, decentring, demystification, discontinuity and difference. Seyla Benhabib (1992) cites Jane Flax's characterization of the postmodern condition as subscription to the theses of the

death of Man, History and of Metaphysics. The postmodern proclamation of the Death of Man rejects all essentialist conceptions of human being or nature. He is reduced to a mere subject position engendered by scientific, cultural and ethical practices. Feminism posits that gender and its associated practices is one such crucial context where the purportedly neutral subject is situated by discursive practices. Similarly, the idea of History as the narrative of the progress of Man 'privileges and presupposes the value of unity, homogeneity, totality, closure and identity.' All of which have been upturned by now by the postmodernist project that exposes the fragmentation and heterogeneity of experience of different groups. Feminism finds this exposition of History as a narrative engendered by White, male subject positions unaccommodating of women's experiences, a potent tool for feminist endeavours.

Most importantly, the Death of Metaphysics rejects all pretexts of foundationalism. Western philosophy is based on a metaphysics of presence. Postmodernism denies the possibility of ever reaching the ultimate reality at the end of the philosophical quest for the Real. It negates the idea of knowledge as the reflection of an independently existing world. There is no objective truth ready to be discovered that is independent of the scientific, cultural and aesthetic milieus that construct it. Heidegger's narrative of the end of metaphysics later developed by Derrida critique the