



Theorizing Sisterhood: Reconstructing the Female and Feminine in Literature

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Abstract

This research paper is meant to be an extension of any study of Women's Studies. The roles of women in societies and domains of knowledge are not devoid of struggles of varied hues. Despite the struggles, women have spelled out a strong presence for themselves over centuries. In the realm of Women's Studies, the waves of Feminism and Womanism have rendered immense strengths and conviction to makeovers in policies, attitudes and structures by highlighting and resisting injustices targeted towards women and men. The struggles and resistances have been strengthened by the collective powers of women's organisations and women's influences on drafting better political and social policies that reduce the struggles and sufferings of both, men and women. This paper elaborates the concept and role of *Sisterhood* and its fundamental status in the realm of Women's Studies.

Keywords: Sisterhood, Feminism, Womanism, Humanism, Oppression, Sameness, Feminist Osmosis Theory

“Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle”

--bell hooks

Sisterhood: An Introduction

Women's studies have strengthened co-relations between Feminism, Womanism, and stories by women, of women, activism and journeys of their struggles. Even though a framework was set to examine them, there emerges an obvious difficulty and shortcoming in their being huddled together under an ideology. It is the diverse and vast expanse of history, topography, language, culture and expression that seem to be spilling out of the implications of ideology. The womanist lens did have a wider angle; nevertheless, the adjustment to the angle has to be essentially made, to be able to view beyond with clarity. Feminism and Womanism, as ideologies rather than as social movements, are subject to many qualifications. Like the curtailing effect of Feminism, if Womanism limits its purview to only African women, then a

contentious relationship would be formed between any discourse on women's studies and the women of the world.

In order to avoid any confrontations, the adjectives that Feminism and Womanism use to qualify women, would need to be restructured and expanded, in order to accommodate the term *Sisterhood*. Like many other concepts in the feminist ideology, the term had a journey of social and critical evolution and implications. As its relevance and meaning altered in various cultures, *sisterhood* began to mean different things to women of the world. For this purpose, a rewind into the times when the term emerged and the meanings that it conveyed can shed light on the need to restructure it.

Throwback: Nomenclature and its Issues

At the onset, a clarification of context and meanings of the words *feminism* and *feminist* are to be stated. While *feminism* refers to the struggle for female equality and many such issues, *feminist* is broader in its representation of a behavior indicating female agency and self-determination. Similarly, the term *female* implies attributes of the biological being of woman, in contrast to the *male* attributes of biology of man. *Femininity* is the psychological grooming of female attributes of the woman, to which specific roles are assigned by family, society and culture. *Masculinity* then becomes the ingrained male qualities in the psyche of males that expect them to adopt certain behavioural patterns and attitudes. Since *Femininity* and *Masculinity* are attributes assigned for social conditioning, they challenge individual psyche and collective psyche, in both advantageous and disadvantageous ways. With the larger acknowledgement of the *Queer*, which refers to attributes of both, masculine and feminine natures, the realm of Gender Studies had to rapidly expand to accommodate studies related to restructuring of both, body and mind, of individuals.

As initiator of Gender Studies, Feminism has been an independent social movement in Europe and America, which was adapted by women in various parts of the world, to define their struggles against suppression, violence and oppression. For instance, Slave trade and European colonization have truncated the concept of self-determination for African women. On the other spectrum, the dominance of caste and religion in the being of women in the Indian sub-continent, have parallel and similar narratives. Meanwhile as the domination of the West grew on Africa, the Africans became politically, economically and culturally dependent on Western Europe and America, for ideas and values. Thereby, an emergence of multiple forms of

oppression was inevitable. Unlike in the European tradition, African *womanhood* was not confined to one specific role, identity or position. For, in Africa, an individual occupies multiple positions that overlap and intersect. Most of these positions have their own share of privilege and loss. These multiple positions emerge due to the state of uncertainty and flux that the enslaved communities often lived in. Moreover, external agents from Europe and America had disproportionate influence on African lives. Therefore, gender could not be singled out as primary focus of any agitation. For in many social groups in Africa, gender was not understood solely on the basis of biological category of sex or social category of gender.

In contrast, in the Western conceptualization of gender, both social and physical roles contribute significantly to any discourse, especially in relation to women. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Western influence on the world's societies grew immensely and so did the presence of gender consciousness. A male-domination order was established in Europe, Arab and Asian countries, which slowly and surely crept into international establishments like the United Nations and World Bank. In order to prove the balance and proportion of sexes, these male-dominated orders, found it convenient to promote the tenets of Western feminism, as the universal movement for the cause of women, to the rest of the world. In its outreach, Western feminist thought became the master-plan for gender consciousness and gender categories, in various guises and disguises. This outreach engulfed the local categories of social roles, ethnicity, race and generations that had prior existed, for centuries. That also meant that, the world studied and understood feminism as primarily concerned with the liberation of women. Although it is a culturally imperialist approach, feminism did succeed in putting forth the concerns of women and their subjugation, to the social forefront.

However, the African women, who were challenging imperialism as a race, alongside their men, found the Western social categories, such as feminism, erasing their histories and discounting non-European cultural norms and institutions. Similarly, the European mantra of *sisterhood* assumed the common victimhood of all women. When the African women and feminists used the term, they realized that *sisterhood* was meant to convey equality and homogenized, respectable position for women, worldwide. While in reality, women are linked together in a variety of unequal relationships, in a social order structured by males. The African feminist coined a term *sisterarchy* to point out the myth that sisters are ever equal. Overlooking terminologies and continental interpretations, like feminism, the term *sisterhood* stayed as a part of discourse on women. It emerged as a dominant model for feminist inter-community

relations. It began to indicate political solidarity in women's activism. The white feminists who initiated its use in a wave of American feminism implied that *sisterhood* is about shared oppression, or solidarity, common victimization, activism for the cause of policy or change and commonality of interest. This basic idea is, of course, enveloped in the rhetoric of kinship and family bonds. Much to the chagrin of many feminists, this envelope was considered to be a limitation and predictably, invited criticism.

Just when African American feminists pointed out to the hypocrisies of white feminists in advocating love and solidarity amongst all women, even while enjoying their class and racial privileges over the Blacks, women in the Indian subcontinent were waging a battle of another kind against oppressive customary and religious practices, suppression and oppression. The term *sisterhood* remained dwarfed. Like feminism could engender new concepts like *Womanism*, *Queer* and *Humanism*, the term *Sisterhood* could not generate alternative terms, for any kind of solidarity. The term *sisterhood* remained in the text books of women's studies despite its limitations pointed out by African American feminists. Just as Walker expanded the realm of feminism to accommodate Womanism, many African American feminists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks attempted to reformulate the term, so that it could carry the weight of the experiences of women, across the world. Terms like *sister outsider* (Lorde 101) by Lorde and *false sisterhood* by hooks, (hooks 43) challenged the racist and classist grounds of white womanhood, while recounting the struggles of their race against white subjugation. For the African-American feminist, *sisterhood* is possible only when divisions of all kinds, especially those of race, are eradicated. *Sisterhood* could be a universal phenomenon only when political solidarity is the target for all feminists. This means that, negotiations between the politics of culture, cultural meaning of *sisterhood* and diversity of cultural experiences have to be deftly carried out, to encompass all women of the world. This nature of negotiating inter-racial, cross-cultural and trans-national experiences proved to be a mammoth challenge. Therefore, the term *sisterhood* continued for the want of a better and more defined nomenclature.

Simultaneously, until 1980s, feminist movement struggled, as there was no clarity on the idea and manner of fulfilling political solidarity, which was mandatory for the existence of feminism, as a movement for women of the world. When sub-sections and new groups, with a variety of nomenclatures, emerged in Europe and America, the commonality of concern for women's rights too, lost its meaning and expanse. *Sisterhood* was no longer a revolutionary accomplishment for which women would struggle and work. For, Feminism had, till now,

evoked the term *sisterhood* on the basis of primarily white, bourgeois women's perception of common oppression of women. It became objectionable for the non-white feminist to accept the idea of *common oppression*, as the true nature of women's complex and diverse social reality was disguised and mystified by a single umbrella term. This umbrella term engulfed the reality of divisions and sufferings.

What then was the reality that *sisterhood* could not face? Firstly, the fact remained that women, all over the world, are divided by attitudes, racism, caste, class, inequality and prejudice. Only when these divisions are confronted and eliminated by sustained effort, can any kind of bonding between women, be imagined. How on earth could these vast and diverse divisions be eliminated? Possibly, by having a common platform, when principles of all ideologies of women's studies merge to benefit all human beings, the term *sisterhood* would apply to women of the world. Nevertheless, the gap between men and women, male and female, feminist and misogynist would continue to wreck the equitability and equality in societies that the present civilization aspires to establish. In circumstances wherein different cultures of the world imbibe multiple differences in their women, a uniform unity among them is a distant dream. However, the term *sisterhood* is the term that continues till date, that evokes this spirit of possible unity, across continents. The term has allowed the feminist movement from diminishing in the universal context. The solidarity conveyed and practiced by the term is a strengthening factor that could face sexist oppression. This solidarity can emerge only when barriers of all kinds are eliminated, to change and transform society, as a whole.

What's in a Name? - Persistence of a Struggle

The baseline from which *sisterhood* started its journey was *common oppression*. This term assumed shared identity and sameness of all women's concerns, which is surely a myth, as many women unknowingly exploit and oppress other women. The nature of these oppressions varied according to the socio-cultural milieu. For instance, there have been recorded oppressions by white women on black women in America, elderly women family members partaking in harassing the younger women and vice-versa, exploitation in marital arrangements like dowry in cultures of the Indian sub-continent, sexual slavery imposed on girls by women in Arab societies, beauty therapies bordering on cruelty and sex-tourism in South-East Asian sub-cultures, opportunism and manipulation in work places by women in industrialized societies and many, similar ones. All led to an eventually shallow notion of female bonding.

They were actually distortions to devalue *sisterhood*. Actual enrichment for women would occur due to bonding as gender affinity and not by using a model created by bourgeois, white liberationists. (Morgan 17)

The commonality of oppression and victimization could not have been solely responsible for such a bonding. Women need not consider themselves to be oppressed or as victims to prioritize feminism as relevant to their lives. Rather, bonding between women should be able to make women be in non-victim state, by being self-assertive and self-affirming, with the support of each other. In contrast to white women, who lived in isolated male dominated hierarchies, the Black and Asian women already had their support structures, in form of strong female bonding and the feminist writers unmistakably, wrote about it. Soon white feminists denied themselves the *victim* identity and found themselves ousted from the feminist movement. Fortunately, this made elite, white women realize their privileged and powerful positions than most women of the world. Now white women learnt that, bonding with other women can happen on basis of shared strengths and resources, much like the way African and Asian women did. This kind of bonding on the basis of strengths, rather than victimization, is the essence of *sisterhood*.

Sisterhood: On an Onward Journey

Patriarchy had a trait of forming circles of people, who formed strong ties amongst themselves by excluding and devaluing people outside their groups. When similar, patriarchal type of grouping began in feminism too, many splinter groups of women like Anarchist feminists, white academic faculty women, and Women's Air-Force Service Pilots (WASP) working class were formed, wherein the participants in the groups supported and protected each other, while expressing hostility towards women outside their groups. This phenomenon was dangerous for the feminist movement as one ideology of one group of women could not define or dominate feminism. Each group of women had to define feminism on their own terms, on the basis of the political commitment to a feminist movement that aims at ending sexist suppression and oppression. For feminism to sustain, women had to strengthen and transform female consciousness, examine women's sexist socializations and build political solidarity to support feminism, in all its varied guises.

Among threats to forming of political solidarity to support the ideology of feminism was firstly, posed by Sexism. In a society comprising of men, women and children, sexism is

mirrored in male domination leading to discrimination, exploitation and oppression of women and children. In a society comprising of women, a similar supremacist attitude is conveyed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behaviour amongst themselves. Sexism trained the women's mind-set to be sex-objects for men, insist on sex-appeal for all women, devalue parenting work and exaggerate the importance of jobs and careers. Sexism made women to feel threatened by each other, for no reason at all, by defining only two patterns- the roles of dominant and submissive. Sexism perpetrated woman-hating, which was consciously and unconsciously acted out in daily interactions of women with each other. For instance, the relationship between the inlaws side of the family in Indian families, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation, co-sisters-in-law, sisters, elderly women exercising roles of authority, are examples of deep rootedness of such sexism in societies. In industrialized world, the women boss-employee relationship is not perceived as a pleasant one. There seemed to be no way out of unlearning Sexism. Nevertheless, feminism, by any other name, persisted on its job of liberation for women.

In times of difficulties, women in parts of the world found ways to group themselves together to share personal experiences, problems and emotions. From this sharing, emerged the realization that what was considered to be a personal problem was based on a social cause and could be resolved politically. Such social causes, attitudes and structures are recognized by women as barriers to their capacities and opportunities. By sharing their experiences, women could ascertain the extent to which they have been side-lined in mainstream functioning, which has led them to be prejudiced against women in positions and other women too. Sharing taught them to develop self-esteem and understand the strength of group solidarity. By 1980s, economic and political orders of the world changed rapidly. Mass productions, warfare technology and software technologies were emerging, which altered the dynamics of many aspects of society. For women, the dimensions of struggles grew, with sustained sexism persisting, as entertainment and publishing industry grew leaps and bounds and became huge employment platforms for women's employment. Nothing of these could curb or restrain the growing sexism in these industries. In fact, chat-shows, soap operas, movies, entertainment magazines continued to portray women and relationships between women, as ones lined with aggression, contempt and competitiveness. At the other spectrum, in academic circles, feminist studies as a discipline had no connection with the feminist movement. This persistent influence of sexism compelled black woman writer then, and Nobel Laureate now, Toni Morrison had to say this to say to her audience at Barnard College, in a commencement address in May 1979,

“I want not to ask you but to tell you not to participate in the oppression of your sisters. Mothers who abuse their children are women, and another woman, not an agency, has to be willing to stay their hands. Women who stop the promotion of other women in careers are women, and another woman must come to the victim’s aid. Social and welfare workers who humiliate their clients may be women, and other women colleagues have to deflect their anger. I am alarmed by the violence that woman do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. I am alarmed by the growing absence of decency on the killing floor of professional women’s worlds.” (hooks 48)

This alienation that Morrison expressed her concern about, could be rectified only by means of a politicized, mass-based feminist movement for which women have to work hard to eliminate alienation, sexist socialization and homophobia. The second impediment to solidarity between women is racism. The multi-ethnic groups that practiced diverse cultural, social and linguistic habits could not formulate any common communication network. Black women were always suspicious of the brutal and dehumanizing manners of the white women; Asian and Arab women have lost their voices as victims of patriarchy and in tribal societies, voices are never heard. While constructing the feminist theory in a manner in which racism was never considered an issue, white women considered race as a political issue, to be dealt by governments, rather than consider the social implication of race. If women and feminist theory would have ways to indicate that racism and sexism is mutually connected, this pitting of women against each other and derogating their struggle would diminish.

Sisterhood: Past, Present and an Unpredictable Future

It has been a continued struggle to find a better term to showcase the combined efforts of keeping the feminist movement alive. By the turn of the twentieth century, sexism and racism had become strong deterrents to spread of feminism, as a common-place ideology in all corners of the world. The feminist movement has to essentially change its direction to unlearn racist socialization, before it took up further powerful positions of leading and shaping theories. For instance, any expansion of the feminist ideology will have to make contact with women of color, non-white women and women of all sub-cultures. Womanism is an example to follow, in this case, as it has expanded the realm of feminism to the domain of African and Black women. For this kind of expansion, any kind of racial oppression or dismissal of non-white women has to be completely neutralized, in its truest sense. This neutralization of oppression would then, create a foundation for the political solidarity between white women and women

of color. Multiple categories of women belonging to Asian, Latin-American, South-Asian, Native American, Africans, African-American and Far-Eastern European cultures need to drop resentment and competitiveness by learning about cultures, share knowledge and skills and gain strength from unity and diversity.

The break-through that Womanism had provided in terms of expansion and inclusion of women of color in the concerns of Feminism had provided a path-breaking pattern, which can be adopted in all future courses of feminism. Further reading and writing about feminism and its barriers, will be concerned about this division amongst women and ways to overcome them. Womanism had already provided one such model of inclusiveness and there is always scope for more to follow. Education and awareness of cultural codes and differences that promote a sense of community, is what the current *sisterhood* aspires to spread. *Sisterhood* in present times should tread delicately. In the garb of universalizing *sisterhood*, there is a risk of homogenizing women as *same* or *uniformed*, without acknowledging the differences in the perceptions and personalities of various women of the world. It is, therefore, important to remind women to acknowledge and appreciate differences, by overcoming the fear of anything *different*. Secondly, women must perceive the fact that all women are not oppressed, nor are women equally oppressed. The range of oppression for women should not let women withdraw to the comforts of not feeling for other women. If women avoided tendencies of comparing and judging, there is value visible in each and every shared experience. Affirming diversities of the concerns and cultures of women, by communicating and sharing through various media, can promote solidarity. Such a sense of solidarity would be the essence of *sisterhood*, in future. Feminist Clenora Hudson Weems explains this *sisterhood* as

“This particular kind of sisterhood refers specially to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood. (Weems 18)

Theorizing ‘Sisterhood’: Collective Concerns and Solidarity

If the quintessential lesson to be understood from Feminism and Womanism is *sisterhood*, the combination of the multiplicities and diversities would require a platform to assemble, to express solidarity. Just as many political and social movements of the world have men

assembling to express solidarity, brotherhood, and unity and formulate slogans to express them, one slogan that did emerge in the jurisdiction of women's studies is *Sisterhood is Powerful*. When women of color took the responsibility of resisting racism in America, in academic and non-academic fronts, they led the way to solidarity, without relying on any (white) women to lead the way for them. For each movement that they conducted in America, women united, cutting across their own lines of class, oppression and suppression, to lend solidarity to the movement. This is a true example of sisterhood in its true meaning and value. Another lesson for *sisterhood* from the Black Women's solidarity movements is denial of class privileges, as characteristic of white society. (Multiple Movements of varied natures were mobilized, with large participation by women, across sections of Europe and America. Some prominent ones were NOW- National Organization of Women, WAR- Women of American Revolution, Lilith's Manifesto of Women's Majority Movement, No More Ms. America, New-York Radical Women, Red-Stockings and WITCH) (Morgan 512)

Of course, with this close relationship between class and economics, the redistribution of wealth by suitable political policies, are also indirectly related to the abolition of economic disparities, which would then remove class demarcations in civil societies. The final statement deducted from all united fronts of struggle is, everyone should be equal. Sexism, Racism and Classism have separated women from one another. Even with splinter groups of varied political and vested interests, though barriers were confronted, one aspect that maintained the commonality of interest for women was *sisterhood*. The broad perspective of commonality would permit encompassing of all women, irrespective of race, class and color and understand the fact and accept the responsibility of fighting oppression, even though the oppressions may not affect every individual, directly. The moment individual concerns or priorities become the reason for participation then the movement suffers. Solidarity is strengthened when collective concerns are the agenda of feminism, where the possibility of variance and disparities is gladly permitted. Sustaining multiple challenges at various intellectual levels, in common parlance the term *sisterhood* still, nevertheless, conveys solidarity. It does not eradicate differences, does not share oppression and does not support anti-male sentiments. Out of this solidarity emerges a wealth of experience, culture and shared ideas that are so optimistic in nature, that it unites women as sisters. The sisters of the world, then, remain united in appreciation, struggles and political solidarity. This is the theoretical conceptualization of *sisterhood* that sustains feminism, till date.

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