

A Critique of the Legacy of Enlightenment in Patricia Waugh's *Postmodernism and Feminism*

Dr. Randhir Singh

Associate Prof. Of English

M.N.S. Govt. College

Bhiwani, Haryana

Abstract

Patricia Waugh is a specialist in modernist and postmodernist literature as well as postmodernist theory and feminist theory. To her, postmodernism is a way of life, a way of feeling and a state of mind. In her critical essay, *Postmodernism and Feminism*, she blends postmodernism and feminism in an effective and efficient manner. She tries to analyse feminism from a postmodernist perspective and puts under scanner the so-called Legacy of Enlightenment Theories of the 17th and 18th century. In this postmodern world, when everything is vastly changing, how can women rely on fixed canons? Moreover, we cannot separate the two concepts i.e. postmodernism and feminism, rather they are intermixed. In this juncture, it would not be possible to generalize the problems of women as women of each category have distinct problems. To be more clear, nothing is absolute or fixed in this world, even the material things are in a state of flux. In this age of postmodernism, women have to be more cautious, alert and flexible.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Feminism, Scanner, Legacy, Enlightenment, Project, Juncture, Flux, Strategic.

Patricia Waugh is a leading literary critic and a specialist in modernist and postmodernist literature. In her *Magnum Opus, Postmodernist and Feminism*, she comes out with her radical and critical arguments having a lot of literary and cultural significance. An effort has been made to critically analyse postmodernism and feminism in its theory and practice. She also puts under scanner the legacy of Enlightenment theories which is also the thrust area of the present study. Patricia Waugh blends two concepts i.e. Postmodernism and feminism in a very effective & efficient manner. Interestingly, these two concepts cannot be separated, rather they are intermixed. It is very easy to define feminism as a political movement as also a political discourse against patriarchy whose objectives are emancipatory. Though it is not easy to define postmodernism, yet an effort has been made to do so. It would be relevant to say that sex is biological and gender is a social construct. Moreover, women of each category have distinct

problems. So, we cannot generalize the problems of women and cannot talk of a universal woman.

In many areas of life, we are still facing modern orthodoxy but due to multiple cultural, social and economic changes, we all are constantly living in a postmodern world. Due to major changes in all spheres of life, it can be said that everything is in a state of flux. The world seems to have changed into a global village rather a federation of values and cultures, a market place with no fixed rules and regulations. In postmodern, “there are no epics, noble heroes grand narratives that elevate our thoughts and passions because all our heroes are dying like flies.”¹ In this fast-changing world better, it would be that we help ourselves and trust our own resources not any eternal belief system. Patricia Waugh is of the view that the term postmodernism “exerts an enormous grip upon our intellectual climate and upon contemporary debates within feminism.”²

The term postmodernism, in the context of the present research project, can be described as an aggregate of diverse cultural practices, writers, thinkers and theoretical accounts of late modernity. In these vastly-changing circumstances, feminism, which can be described as a humanist philosophy, cannot afford to be stable. The modest endeavour of the present study is the critique of the legacy of the Enlightenment theories with reference to *Postmodernism and Feminism*. As we know that Enlightenment is a project to develop objective science, universal morality law and independent art according to universal logic. Interestingly enough, Patricia Waugh nurtures the view that science, ethics, values, art, and literature and even feminism cannot be seen or studied separately. Besides, “it rejects the existence of a separate category of the aesthetic which is removed from the realm of science ethics or everyday cultural practice” (M.L.T. P.344).

German theorist Jurgen Habermas, while working on modernity, in 1980, said: “the modern period begins with the Enlightenment, that period of about one hundred years, from the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth, when a new faith arose in the power of reason to improve human society”.³ This legacy of so-called Enlightenment gave birth to belief system that a break with tradition followed by reason and logic can provide solutions to the problems of society. Habermas calls it modernity. We can agree with Habermas that the French deconstructionist thinking of the 1970, such as Derrida and Foucault discouraged this kind of Enlightenment modernity. In the context of the present study, many feminists would not accept the total abandonment of the Enlightenment project.

Patricia Waugh is of the view that, today, feminism has come to a stage that accused Enlightenment thinkers who have created universal categories of knowledge and value which

have excluded women or certain groups of people. Thus postmodernism has its roots in deconstruction where the meaning of a text is always provisional. Patricia Waugh tries to illustrate her point by quoting Ihab Hassan. She says:

“Ihab Hassan has usefully offered an epochal definition of postmodernism as an: ‘antinomian movement that assumes a vast unmasking of the western mind’ He uses the term ‘unmasking’, to cover terms such as deconstruction, decentring, demystification, discontinuity and difference, which feature prominently in postmodern discourse. These terms assume or imply a rejection of the idea of rational coherent subject, and the end of ‘grand narratives’ of universal truth or of ideas such as Marx’s theory of progressive development of productive forces” (M.L.T.P. 345).

Patricia Waugh in the essay *postmodernism and feminism*, discards western logo centrism and of grand-narrative, in the context of postmodernist philosophy. Moreover, the demise of a rational subject also includes the collapse of notion of truth. Contemporary critics such as Derrida, Roland Barthes, Foucault and Todorov have also been critical of a final truth is a work of art. Michael Foucault has also been critical of the Enlightenment Project as it perpetrates violence under the banner of freedom and progress. Hence Postmodernism shifts its focus on the ideas of difference, plurality, fragmentation and non-totality, aesthetic self-fashioning and language games thus finding crisis in the modern understanding of selfhood. We cannot deny the fact that this crisis in the selfhood has also adversely affected feminism. Waugh is of the view that feminism is a postmodernist discourse which has its growing incredulity towards universal truth. It would be pertinent to quote Patricia Waugh in this context:

“Feminists have shown how Enlightenment discourses universalise white western middle class male experience and have thus exposed the buried strategies of domination explicit in the ideal of objective knowledge. Feminists as well as postmodernists have long recognised the need for a new ethics responsive to technological changes and shifts in the understanding between relations of power and knowledge” (MLT. P346).

While talking of the relations of feminism and postmodernism, the question arises if it would be possible to maintain the ideals of emancipation with reference to modernity. Patricia Waugh, further, argues that feminism has tried its level best to reconcile as also to modify the Enlightenment, in the context of modernity, keeping in mind the specific requirements and perspectives of women. Then she tries to disentangle the relations between postmodernism and feminism and advocates two categories of postmodernism-strong and weak. Instead of globalising the accounts of postmodernism, Waugh says that feminism is free to take a strategic defence on postmodernism. Strong postmodernism champions perspectivism and difference, thus refusing the idea that there is a reality, because concepts construct and even reproduce reality. It denies total acceptance of universal truths and calls for an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of language games and little narratives. Now, Patricia Waugh puts under scanner the concept of weak postmodernism and its relevance in the context of feminism. Those who are reluctant to opt for strong postmodernism may embrace weak one which may accept grand-narratives. According to this version, understanding may arise from the practices, traditions and culture. We may have a shared set of values as collective participation does not require foundation of a truth and value.

To sum up the whole argument we can say that science reason, logic and rationality, during seventeenth and eighteenth century, made a significant contribution for human development and progress, but still we cannot accept it in its totality. Besides, in the vastly-changing postmodernist world, it would not be justifiable to talk of a universal woman. Postmodernism and feminism as literary, cultural, and emancipatory movement have made a significant contribution towards a critique of the Legacy of Enlightenment during modernism. No other approach, on the present intellectual scenario, provide a source of transforming hegemonic modernity. We cannot deny the fact that the legacy of Enlightenment, during seventeenth and eighteenth century, have helped a lot for the emancipation of women but still their oppressive role cannot be altogether discarded. Patricia Waugh, as a postmodern feminist thinker, is strongly against the universality of gendered experiences in a patriarchal structure of society. Moreover, it does not seem feasible that feminism, as a political and humanistic movement, can survive without interrogating logo centism and discourses of Enlightenment.

References

1. N. Krishnaswamy, John Varghese , Sunita Mishra, *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Student Companion* (New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd, Reprinted 2005), (P.19).
2. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh ed; *Modern Literary Theory* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury India,2019)(P.344). All subsequent references to the text of essay are from the same edition with relevant page numbers given within the parentheses immediately after the quotation.
3. Peter Berry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Theory And Cultural Theory , Third Edition* , (Viva Books, Reprinted 2017), (P.82).