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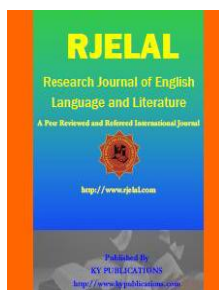
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"CRISIS" OF ENGLISH STUDIES: COMPLICACIES OF FEMINIST THEORY IN THE THIRD WORLD

NIKU CHETIA

M.Phil Research Scholar
Department of English, Gauhati University



ABSTRACT

During the 1960's, 'theory' witnessed a crisis. The crisis was a question on its survival. A sphere of study which was spreading rapidly in humanities was questioned whether it is good to continue in the field of literature. Critics like Stanley Fish, Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels and Peter Washington protested against the use of theory due to its autonomous existence as a whole and its incompatible usage in literature. Despite this crisis, theory began to slowly settle to form a significant part of literary studies. However, in recent years, the use of theories, which belongs to the west are 'violently yolked' into the study of third world literature. As a result, it becomes extremely difficult to come in terms with the existing third world literature due to the tendency to judge it in terms of western theories. This paper is an exploration of feminism and its complicacies in dealing with third world literature. It also comments on the need to adopt a different attitude towards its study.

Keywords: Theory, Feminism, Third world, Vision and crisis

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In the history of English studies, the discipline had faced numerous objections and changes concerning the manner in which it needs to be studied. The collaboration of figures like T.S Eliot, Henry New Bolt, Leavis, R.W Chambers are enormous in scale. If we trace back to address the question as to why English had to be established as a discipline, we will embark on certain political as well as aesthetic aspects. In recent years English studies had undergone a sea change with the introduction of "theory" as methodologies to study literature. Though 1960's saw a crisis concerning the discipline in which many critics like Stanley Fish, Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels and Peter Washington protested against the use of theory due to its autonomous existence as a whole and its

incompatible usage in literature, theory began to slowly settle to form a significant part. My paper will investigate the complicacies of studying Western theory in studying Third world literature. Moreover, it would further argue the need to develop theories from third world perspectives to survive the growing crisis.

The use of 'theory' in literary studies was questioned by Professors like Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. In their article named "Against theory", they said that theory refers to a special project in literary criticism. It is an attempt to govern interpretation of particular texts. The use of contemporary theory has always been with an objective to 'guarantee objectivity' and validity of interpretations (723). Theory aims at solving

problems: function of authorial intention, status of literary language and role of interpretive assumptions. However, the critics opine that the assumption by theorists to consider these as real problems are grounds on which theory loses its relevance. The use of theory as a mode of interpreting literary studies is not irrelevant. However, the 'objective to guarantee objectivity' has remained a major hurdle in considering its relevance in English studies. Theories like Eco-criticism, Marxism, Feminism have all evolved in the West. Critical analysis of maxims forwarded by these theorists have been questioned by various critics. Peter Barry in his Introduction of *Beginning Theory* claims that "1980's probably saw the high watermark of literary theory" (1). Indeed, it was during this time when theory was attacked with criticisms for inclusion in the field of English studies. The "crisis" of English studies led to large scale debate and questioning of the future of literary studies. There were many allegations against the use of theory. University Professors and Critics complained about "theory" being a discipline on its own as concepts such as Marxism, Feminism, and Cultural materialism were studied in isolation in higher education (Guy and Small 15). While conducting a critical research one can decipher a similar "crisis" of English studies in the Third world. The theories that have originated in the West had made a remarkable impact in studying literary texts having third world as its setting. Theories like Marxism, Eco criticism, Feminism, Structuralism have all originated in the West. However, they are seen to be yoked together in literary texts to create a fresh approach to literary texts. One might argue that these theories (or at least some of them) are universal in its approach and is applicable to all irrespective of its geographical or cultural location. If it is so, this is precisely the problem that we need to address as a "crisis" in the field of English studies in the third world. At a time when literary theory had cemented itself and taken for granted as part of the curriculum, it is a risky affair to argue about the importance of contexts while studying literary texts. There have been numerous analyses of literary texts from a feminist perspective. First wave feminism evolved during the late 18th century with the

publication of books like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Woolf's *A Room of One's own*, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and so on. The second wave began during the 1960's with theorists like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray. One of the major problems of western feminists is to homogenize the condition of woman. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in his essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" alleges that feminists have produced "Third world woman" as a singular monolithic subject (333). He takes certain feminists into account who belongs geographically to the West. There has always been an assumption on the part of the feminists to club woman together irrespective of their cultural differences. The idea of woman belonging to the third world as ignorant, poor, uneducated, family oriented is in sharp contrast to the idea of Western woman who are said to be modern, educated, having freedom to make their own decisions. Woman as a homogeneous group is produced on the basis of "sociological and anthropological universals" (337). He had made an interesting observation by claiming that the process of labeling third world woman as weak, powerless and exploited is similar to that of sexist notions that claim woman as weak, emotional and having math anxiety. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, in their article entitled "Challenging Imperial Feminism" discusses the processes by which Western feminism seeks to establish itself as the only legitimate ideas in current political practice. Even when white woman seem to express their suppression from the white males, they tend to exclude the experiences of Black woman in America. Even when their experiences are argued; it is always racist in approach. Historically White woman's sexuality has been constructed in oppositional terms to that of Black Women. The problems faced by Black feminists itself suggests the failure of Western feminism as it fails to address the concerns of its territory. Moreover, the writers claim that as "Black and Third World women are being told that imperialism is good for us, it should be of no surprise to anyone when we reject a feminism which uses Western social and economic systems to judge and make pronouncements about how Third world

woman can become emancipated". The feminists' attitude towards the Third world is political. It seeks to see and judge through their eyes and fail to make an assessment on the contexts in which woman's experience differ.

The reception of the west regarding the attires of the third world is different. The Indian "sari" has been accepted worldwide with a positive notion. However, the "hijab" has been relegated to be a paradigm of oppression. Falguni A. Sheth in her article "The Hijab and the Sari: The Strange and the Sexy between Colonialism and Global Capitalism" observes that the impact of colonialism has rendered the sari as something natural. The hijab is alleged to conceal their sexuality as well as used to keep them aloof from the outer world. The dress code of Western woman also varies in contexts or situations. As the critics opine that to "unconceal one's waist, shoulder, cleavage and arms" seems to be acceptable when a Western woman is in a beach rather than in the office or classroom (Sheth). Thus, the context plays an important role. However, the hijab may be means to eschew itself from Western world. Moreover, it is an identity that makes the Muslim population different from others and give them their own identity. More often, it is the colonial world that speaks and authorizes the dress code for other woman. The writers uses the term "colonially domesticated sari" to explain the cause of the acceptability of sari in Western world. In France the "hijab" was banned as public expressions of religion is a hinderance to achieve French secular citizenship. Though the critic focuses more on the acceptability of the sari and discarding of the hijab, I would like to throw light on the reception of saree as projected by Shyam Selvadurai in his work *The Hungry Ghosts*. The protagonist's sister Renu was bewildered by the claim by a western woman that saree is a symbol of oppression. The traditional wear of our culture should not be considered as a medium of oppression. I am not claiming to discard western influences altogether; rather I am trying to point the saree as an identity of certain nations of the third world. In this context I would like to mention M K Gandhi, who wore the khadi dress in order to offer resistance to British rule. As a remedy to this growing "crisis" in the school of English

studies, I would like to say that the third world must present themselves and articulate their culture as an identity marker and explicitly make it clear that various assets (hijab, saree) that forms their tradition are not markers of oppression. Thus, one must be extremely careful in employing western theories in considering woman of the third world. Western theorists are often judgemental about third world culture. As colonialism permeated, it played an important role to play in propagation of the discourses on hijab. Mihret Woldesemait in her work *Unfolding the Modern Hijab: From the colonial viel to pious fashion*, claims that the colonial writers are judgemental in making remarks about the hijab. The 19th and 20th century witnessed European governments establishing themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries (16). However, the occident was seen to articulate their own views on 'hijab' and 'harem'; rather than considering the voices of the orient. The veil which is considered as sacred, preserving identity by the Middle East woman has been interpreted as oppressive and exotic by the European or Western counterparts. Moreover, the 'harem' which refers to a cloistered space where Muslim woman leads their life is interpreted variedly. In Arabic, 'harem' means "sacred, inviolable space and also the female members of the family" (18). Hoodfar in his work "The veil in their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Woman" claims that 'Harem's were represented as places where Muslim man exploits woman sexually (8). Catharina Fouche had once the opportunity of touring the Middle East along with the Prince and Princess of Wales. She expresses pity for the women in 'harem' and refers to them "miserable creatures" leading "dull" and "ignorant" lives. In his context, Hoodfar makes an interesting observation as he claims that it is precisely the boredom of Western woman compelled them to make a tour of the East.

Apart from being oppressive, the 'veil' was accused to be a hurdle towards civilization. Woldeasmait observes that the 'veil' is seen as enslavement by the Western counterparts. She claims that Western notions about the veil had made them form a social hierarchy where the Middle East woman are at the bottom as they don

the veil. Similarly, Indians are at the middle as they are slowly unveiling and the Western women are at the top of the structure as they do not veil themselves. Even Cromer, who voted for Woman's education hopes that education would unveil the Middle Eastern woman. The prejudice against the 'hijab' and 'harem' is also a sort of colonialism imposed by the West. In order to move away from its clutches, the hijab or harem should not be studied in terms of Western notions or concepts.

Western theories are seen to be yoked violently in reading literary texts. I am not claiming that this kind of approach to literature is totally wrong; but seeking for an alternate approach to literary texts where the context is paid much heed. Edward Said had pointed out in his work *Orientalism*, that in the portrayal of the character Kuchuk Hanem, the Western writer spoke on behalf of the dancer; rather than offering her own voice. In this process, the Oriental figure fails to articulate its own interests and beliefs. Throughout the history of third world nations, we find the development of ideas regarding its own culture. These theories are rooted in their beliefs and customs. For instance, the Indian classical theories are in no way inferior to the Western concepts. Remarkably, Indian theories have evolved much earlier than Western ones. The purpose of making a detour to Indian classical theory is to point out the potential of Indian critics to develop theories from "third world perspective". While reading the forward of Ramarajan Mukherjee in the book, *Indian Poetics and Western Thought* one can find that the Western modes of thought started with Aristotle and continued its course of thoughts through Arnold, Coleridge, Eliot and the theorists. Similarly, Indian school of thought started with Bahama finishing his work *Natyasastra* and it flows through Bhabhama and Anandavardhana. Key concepts like *Rasa* which has been interpreted in diverse ways by literary critics is an important part of poetry. It is a process of aesthetic realization. Some opine that *Rasa* is achievable through inferential knowledge and some feel that it can be felt in the heart by the connoisseurs of poetry. Much has been worked upon the concept of *Rasa*. Similarly Bhattanayaka brings in the concept of generalization where characters and situations are presented in

universalised forms. Kuntaka develops the concept of "Vakrokti" which is the balance that exists between music of sound and sense. Though the former tries to suppress one over the other, the literary artist does not allow it to do so and the balance between the two is maintained throughout the poem. Literary figures such as Sri Aurobindo declared that in order to appreciate poetry the connoisseur should have a spiritual eye. It is only then the reader can have a glimpse of the 'Infinite' and "Bliss" associated with poetry. The contributions of Indian critics towards poetry is immense. This can also be deciphered from Bhartrhari's concept of *Sphota*: idea of the word and *Dhvani*: the physical structure where there is a relation of actual identity between the word and meaning. It has also been said that *Dhvani* which is produced by speech organs do not produce any meaning. This concept put forward by a Sanskrit philosopher reminds us about Ferdinand de Saussure and Structuralism of the 20th century. However, these concepts have lost into antiquity. The foundation of Indian literary theory is rich and has provided a foundation on which theories from third world perspectives can be laid. Similarly, there has been numerous accounts of Middle East texts which focus on the 'hijab' as a sacred attire. The ignorance of these contexts would problematize the use of theory in third world. The growing crisis can only be accentuated only through the growth of third world theories which would help counter certain aspects of western feminism.

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