

Feminism and Literature: An Interactive Speech by Dr. Radha Chakravarty

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The department of English and Humanities of BRAC University arranged a seminar by Dr. Radha Chakravarty on Feminism and Literature, on the 12th November at the university campus. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of English in Gargi College, University of Delhi and the proud recipient of the Dr. Radhakrishnan Memorial Award. She has published English translations of major Bengali writers, in her books *Crossings*, *Chokher Bali* and *In the Name of the Mother*. In her talk, she discussed feminism in the light of literature and how these two are linked within the same frame.



Professor Chakravarty began so wonderfully, that she managed to grab the attention of everyone at once. She began her talk with two Bangla stories, which have been translated into English. One of them was Tagore's short story, "Khata", a 19th century feminist writing, where a young girl-Uma's urge to write was portrayed. She used to write wherever she could manage to and sometimes in her brother's exercise books as well. Seeing her interest, her brother bought her an exercise book of her own, where she could write. At the age of nine, she was married off and when her sisters-in-law got to know about this book, it was snatched away from her. So, she had to quit writing forever.

But the other story had a different ending and approach. It was Sabitri Roy's 20th century writing named "Auntohsholila", where Shakuntala had the interest to write. But she managed to keep on writing in this story, while remaining a wife and a mother. Thus the speaker began her discussion with the examples of the stories of two female writers, one of which rebelled and survived as a writer and another got lost into the social roles and responsibility.

Then she went on talking about different theories of feminism and Western feminism writings. She referred to Kamala Bhasin, according to whom, patriarchy is not only one system, but several systems that rule under the label of patriarchy everywhere. Every patriarchal system is different from each other, whether within the same society or in different ones.

Again, at a point, the Professor referred to Virginia Woolf, a true modern writer who felt that a woman needed a room of one's own and 500£ a year to write literature (*A Room Of One's Own*). At the same time, she gives the example of Buchi Emecheta, who wrote in extreme poverty while she worked and took care of her five children all by herself. So, the point Radha

Chakravarty tried to establish here was that feminism doesn't work in postcolonial lands, the way it does in the west. The postcolonial women have to be doubly bound because of their race and patriarchy (male dominating society); so they are doubly colonized. That is why African feminists have given a separate name to their feminist beliefs and activities as a protest, calling it "Womanism".

She talked about the process of women writers referring back to the earlier writers, which she called, "the process of thinking back through foremothers". This process, she felt, gives women a feeling of unity or even refusal and builds a connection between them, may it be positive or negative. In addition, the speaker spoke about the strategies that women follow while reading, writing or applying the theories of feminism. They follow indirect strategies, which Emily Dickinson points out in her poem saying, "Tell all truth, but tell it slant".

The "otherness" of women is once more a trend that has always been there in patriarchy. Ms. Chakravarty then brought in Charlotte Bronte's one of the most famous novels, *Jane Eyre*. She mentioned Gilbert and Gubar, who bring the notion of "The Madwoman in the Attic" in their findings about the 19th century woman writers, which was formed analyzing the character of Bertha-the "other" woman in Rochester's life. Some critics argue that Bertha is not only a counter image of Jane, but also of Bronte herself. As there tends to be a distance between what societies expect us to be like, and what we are in fact; there are often conflicts between "the proper" and "the other".

Furthermore, Professor Chakravarty talked about the French feminists, who feel that women write differently because of their body structure. The stream of consciousness or flow of women's writing come from the fluids and bodily processes within them, they argue. Here Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* and Margaret Atwood's poem "Spelling" are the key examples for this style of writing where there are continuous references to blood, milk, ink or water.

Radha Chakravarty criticized some misconceptions present in the society about feminism and literature then. She stated that not all literature written by women can be called "feminist" literature and not all feminist texts are written by women. Again, she criticized the fact that the non-fictional feminist texts are often regarded as social documents, which should not be the case at all. She affirmed that literature should be read as literature only and the line should be drawn between the personal and the political.

Then the Professor mentioned the binaries about men and women. She explained the biological sexes, where sex is the biological features of females and gender is the social association to a certain body-type. There are stereotypical associations with the images of males and females. There are many dualisms, many contrasts. Women are seen as bodies and men as minds, women as objects and men as subjects. At one point, women are associated with emotions, in the other, men with reasons. Thus a whole spectrum of positions for both the sexes is constructed within patriarchy.

Another tradition in feminist literature, both fictional and non-fictional, has been their tendency to challenge the heterosexual norms of the society, the Professor claimed. Feminist texts have given the scope for alternative spaces within the utopian construct. Feminist writers often follow

intertextuality, where they rewrite the myths from their points of view or foreground the texts written by women in different ages.

Finally, she concluded her speech by reading out some lines from her unpublished book, where she emphasized on certain points. She felt that feminism is an alternate kind of humanism, which is interconnected with all the other issues of life and society.

It does not only give freedom or power to woman, but it also brings along some responsibilities with it. Therefore, feminism is not about individualism, but is a collective awareness, where separate rights get lost in mutual love. So, this struggle is not about equality or superiority, but it is about unity.