ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of philosophy from feminist perspectives. It seeks to search if there are final and complete solution to combat the problem of women’s oppressed situation. In its persual, it notes the ways in which feminist theorists analyze and renegotiate the traditional philosophical enterprise. A special emphasis has been placed in the French feminist approaches.

Recent decades have witnessed intense debate among feminists, especially in France, the United Kingdom and the United States, about the exclusion of women from philosophy and the way they get represented in philosophical works. To be a woman associated with philosophy is to encounter a number of difficulties. At the very outset arises the problem about the location reserved for a woman within the discipline. Above all other academic disciplines, it is the history of philosophy that recounts the contribution of “Great Men of Ideas” and in the recall of ‘great’ philosophers from the past women seem to be strikingly amiss, at best confined to the role of a disciple, or simply a master’s assistant. Ways in which philosophy can be alien and inhospitable to women, is something that is problematic, and needs to be negotiated.

Women philosophers involved in theorizing the relationship between feminism and philosophy realized that issues concerning gender were largely invisible in mainstream philosophizing. In addition to this came the recognition that though the male philosophers had written a great deal about women much of it was infected with sexism and misogyny. Whereas the study of philosophy had seemed to be something to which gender was irrelevant, much of philosophy infact assumed and was addressed to a male subject.
In the sixties, feminists began to question various images, representations, ideas and presumptions that traditional theories developed about women and the feminine. They directed their theoretical attention to patriarchal discourses—those which were openly hostile to and aggressive towards women and the feminine, and those which had nothing at all to say about women. Feminists of this category seemed largely preoccupied with the inclusion of women in those spheres from which they had been excluded, that is, with creating alternatives which would enable women to be regarded as men’s equals. Instead of being ignored by and excluded from theory, women were to be included as possible objects of investigation. Issues with direct relevance to women’s lives such as family, sexuality, ‘private’ or domestic sphere, interpersonal relations were to be included as worthy of intellectual concern. They begun by addressing issues of practical ethics and politics making use of existing philosophical tools and techniques. Later feminist theory on moved to investigating the overt and covert ways in which the devaluation of women was found to be inherent in the most enduring ideals, central concepts, and dominant theories of philosophy.

Feminists attempted to include women as equals of men in the sphere of theoretical analysis, putting to use various theories of (class or race) oppression by modifying and adjusting their details in order to account for women’s oppression. With these efforts women who had been neglected and denied of any value in patriarchal terms became focal points of empirical and theoretical investigation.

Feminist theorizing involves a recognition of the overt and covert forms of misogynous discourses inculcating the skills of unraveling the procedures
that make those discourses patriarchal. Feminists expose explicit patriarchal
definitions of men and women, and their respective values, as well as the
inclination of theories towards the interests of the masculine world. It also
involves an ability to recognize patriarchal disclosures in terms of the absences,
gaps, lacunae regarding the question of women and the feminine, giving voice
to the silences that are included in the structuring of patriarchal discourses.

This approach however suffered criticism on the basis that while
elements or components of patriarchal disclosure were brought into account,
questions about their more basic framework and assumptions, whether
ontological, epistemological or political remain unquestioned. Though feminist
theory was critical toward the attitude of patriarchal disclosure to the position
of women, it confined itself to the issues that directly affect women’s lives,
leaving other broader or more public issues of relevance unquestioned.

However, within a short period it became clear that the aim of
including women as men’s equals within patriarchal theory was faced with a
number of problems. It became clear that it was not possible simply to include
women in those theories where they had previously not been taken cognizance
of. Many patriarchal discourses were incapable of being broadened or extended
to include women without major revisions and transformations for it lacked the
space within the confines of these discourses to accommodate women’s
inclusion and equal participation. Moreover, even if women were incorporated
into patriarchal discourses, at best they could only be regarded as variations of
a basic humanity. Besides the project of women’s equal inclusion meant that
only women’s sameness to men, only women’s humanity and not their
womanness could be discussed. Further, while women could not be included as
the objects of theoretical speculation, their position as the subjects or producers of knowledge was not acknowledged. In adopting the role of the male subjects of knowledge, to borrow a term from Irigaray, women began to assume the role of surrogate men.

Because it is not simply the range and scope of objects that required transformation, but more profoundly the questions posed and the methods used to answer them. Basic assumptions about methodology, criteria of validity and merit, all needed to be seriously questioned. The political, ontological and epistemological commitments underlying patriarchal discourses (philosophy), as well as their theoretical contents required re-evaluation from feminist perspectives. As it became clear that women could only be included in patriarchal texts as deviant or duplicate men, with an assumption of sameness, sexual neutrality or indifference women’s specificities and differences could not be accommodated in traditional theoretical terms. Therefore the whole social, political, ethical and metaphysical underpinnings of patriarchal theoretical systems were in requirement of revision.

In abandoning any such attempts to include women where theory excluded them, many feminists came to realize that the project of women’s inclusion as men’s equals was problematic and ultimately Utopian. But the aspiration towards equality between men and women was nevertheless, historically necessary for without such attempts, women could not question the naturalness or apparently inevitable second-class status of woman as non citizens, objects, sexual beings etc. This aim of equality served as an experiential pre-requisite to the more far-reaching struggles directed towards
female autonomy, that is from women’s rights to political, social, economic and intellectual self-determination. Luce Irigaray has been a chief critic of this utopian ideal of equality.

The theoretical perpetuation of patriarchy involves the attribution of superiority to male subject and assigned complimentarity to female as an object as an opposite of subject, with a role to compliment the masculine purpose. In other words canonical philosophers develop models of human subjectivity (which is universal) that represent all the variations of subjectivity only according to a singular male model. Feminity is always represented in some relation of dependence on this model, a lack or absence of the qualities characterizing masculinity. On Irigaray’s reading, this institutes a phallic economy, an economy based on sameness, oneness or identity with the masculine subject – an ‘apriori of the same’. Thus, in Irigaray’s view to include women in patriarchal theoretical machinery is to serve its purpose.

Phallocentrism, utilizes one model of subjectivity i.e. the male by which all others are positivity or negativity defined. Irigaray argued that women as ‘Others’ are constructed as variations of this singular type of subject. They are thus reduced to or defined only by terms chosen by and appropriate for masculinity. The concern of Irigaray, among other things, is the recategorisation of women and feminity so that they are now capable of being autonomously defined according to women’s and not men’s interests. Irigaray suggests the creation of difference: sexual difference which we have discussed in Chapter four.
This seems probably the most striking shift in feminist theory since its revival in the sixties. Equality implied a measurement according to a given standard. Equality is the equivalence of two (or more) terms, where one takes the role of norm or model without questioning it. Irigaray’s approach implies the right to accept or reject a situation according to one’s will in accordance with the appropriateness of the situation to one’s self definition. This attempt clearly shows that feminist’s concerns have dramatically changed the feminist attitude towards the patriarchal discourses. The tools and frameworks used in discourses, methods and assumptions which treated woman as objects were now to become targets of critical feminist scrutiny. The intention was not to fit-in woman into pre-existing philosophic-patriarchal spaces, instead it is women’s lives and experiences which were accounted for to subvert and challenge them. Basic, unspoken assumptions of philosophical theories, the way in which they develop and gain precedence, their use of criteria and methods of inclusion and exclusion all came under the scanner.

While Irigaray’s approach to sexual difference was to provide an alternative Julia Kristeva moved beyond this in an attempt to dissolve the very problem of masculine/feminine debate. Kristeva suggested version of subjectivity i.e. A Subject-in-Process.

The thesis is, therefore designed to contribute to the process of cannon transformation, with a careful examination and analysis of the notions affecting women’s situation, by offering a reading of the feminist philosophers from the point of view of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Such a rereading converges our attention to the ways in which woman and the role of the feminine is constructed and reinforced.
In the First chapter of the thesis entitled “Feminisms: Initiation into Transformational Politics”, we have explored the historical background of feminism, the causes responsible for the emergence of the various movements, and some recurrent themes like binary oppositions, justice and equality of the sexes.

In the Second chapter entitled “Tracing the Misogynous: An Exploration into the Foundations of Philosophy” we have studied to highlight the endemic misogyny of male philosophers in noting the ways in which philosophy commonly assumed the exclusion of women as citizens, as rational subjects or as moral agents and in chartering the ways in which women were devalued or seen as inferior. This history of sexism and misogyny has largely been invisible to the academic philosophical mainstream and has often been dismissed as unimportant, a kind of ‘local accident’ whose recognition need not otherwise affect philosophical discussion and theorizing. A study of Aristotle, Plato, Locke, Kant, Descartes and Spinoza has been made.

The Third chapter is entitled as “Rupturing Stereotypes: A Search for Equality”. In this chapter we make a study of early feminists Mary Wollstonecraft, J.S. Mill and Simone de-Beauvoir’s analysis and response to the misogyny or sexism inherent in philosophy. Presenting a critique of these three feminist philosophers we locate a pertinent question which they dealt with. Is there a sense, for example in which some ideals of reason and virtue might themselves be seen as ‘masculine’? We also noticed that the analysis of this kind of ‘masculinity’ reaches far deeper than merely detecting and cataloguing or analyzing overt instances of misogyny or sexism.
Feminist theory at this juncture sought to analyze the conditions which shape women’s lives and to expose cultural understanding of what it means to be a woman. It was initially guided by the political aims of women’s movement the need to understand women’s subordination and exclusion from or marginalization within a variety of cultural and social arenas. Feminists refuse to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable and insist that they should be questioned.

The title of chapter Fourth is “Celebration of Difference: The Road to Salvation” an attempt is made to renegotiate canonization within philosophy and feminist philosophy with reference to Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference. It is also to suggest that Irigaray’s idea of sexual difference works towards the feminist purpose of remaking attitudes towards differences, thus leading to philosophical, socio-cultural, psychological, linguistic and legal transformations. The recognition of sexual difference provided a conceptualization which brought to trial the disinterested discourse adopted by patriarchal and phallocentric inclinations.

In the Fifth chapter entitled as “Subject-in-Process: An Emergence of Pluralities” we have studied Kristeva’s analysis of linguistics and psychoanalysis in the construction of subjectivity that shapes and is in turn shaped by gender and sexuality. Kristeva’s project of bringing subject in process has the consequence of exposing the sexism inherent in the philosophical practices. This will involve examining the relationship between language and the subject bringing into consideration three areas of enquiry: Kristeva’s position on the claims of Western Philosophy that lead to fortifying patriarchy and sexist inclinations, the role played by language in the
constitution of subjectivity as an open-ended process and the exposure of the limitations of patriarchal discourse, especially by mainstream Western philosophy.

We conclude the thesis with concluding remarks that feminist investigations should always leave questions half answered or explored, awaiting contributions and debate from other thinkers. For example, the study of the condition of women is not a matter of concern of a particular group neither created by purely subjective concerns, instead it is an object of study that extends through history and across cultures. Therefore the truth of women’s oppression cannot be summed up in an abstract or general claim but pours out of plurality of voices that cannot be unified into coherent logos. And therefore no single solution could bring salvation and suffice to serve the purpose.