



Hydra of Discourses: Contesting Narratives in Gender Relations

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Abstract

Using the metaphor of the mythological Hydra, where each vanquished narrative gives rise to newer contested ones, this study examines the intricate and always changing nature of discourses in gender interactions. The paper explores the history of feminist theory and its conflicts with patriarchy, starting with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). It also looks at the internal divisions within feminism. bell hooks and other black feminists' critiques of white feminism show how one counter-narrative frequently creates new power dynamics and exclusions. Adrienne Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum" and current discussions around transgender inclusivity in feminist contexts are also discussed in the paper. The discussion places literature as a vehicle for gender politics resistance and negotiation by focusing on Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. James Messerschmidt and R.W. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity is also discussed in the essay, which demonstrates how men are also subjected to dominance within gender hierarchies. In the end, it contends that the conflict of discourses in gender relations is similar to the Hydra - fluid, regenerating, and full of contradictions - but it also demands solidarity, inclusivity, and moral obligation to build a more just social structure.

Keywords: Gender Relations, Feminism, Patriarchy, Hegemonic Masculinity, Intersectionality.

Analyzing the flow of discourses in relationships in societies is tantamount to studying the working of the mythical monster Hydra. Once you vanquish one narrative,

another contesting one crops up to stare at you with the inherited intent to dominate spilling over into it from the earlier one. We saw that in the French Revolution when the oppressed

refused to bend the knee and stormed the Versailles. However, in the immediate aftermath, Robespierre glared his terrorizing head and inherited the tyrannizing traits of the likes of King Louis XVI. The state of France has since been in intermittent turmoil with demonstrations routine against not the original *raison d'être* of the 1789 French Revolutionaries but against other form(s) of actual, perceived, or potential dubious discourses even in 2024 under President Macron.

In gender studies too, discord against existing or up-and-coming narrative(s) seems to be an indelible feature. Gender studies had a watershed year in 1792 with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It was a battle cry against patriarchy and she was argumentative against all the constructs spawned by patriarchy. She accuses John Milton as complicit with the perpetuation of patriarchy:

Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of men... (Wollstonecraft 10)

Wollstonecraft managed to stir the hornet's nest and, eventually, many other discourses targeting patriarchal propagations started seeing the light of the day. However, once this movement started gaining steam and patriarchy as the original head of trouble got somewhat subdued, newer heads of domination reared their heads. Women themselves started getting authoritative, many alleged. The likes of bell hooks said that white women were negligent towards the cause(s) of black women. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks contests the supposed authority of

white women and presents her own discourse that black women are always belittled:

They did not see us as equals. They did not treat us as equals. And though they expected us to provide first-hand accounts of black experience, they felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic. (hooks 11)

Thus, apparently, a chasm appeared in the original discourse. Feminism in its first profoundly influential genesis of 1792 railed against patriarchal constructs. However, this discourse of women against patriarchal discourse was perforated by another discourse by another group of women who claimed that white women were not inclusive of women of color. hooks and many other black feminists pointed out that 'woman' did not look like a holistic category under the white feminist pioneers. bell hooks said that the experiences of a black woman can be very different from that of a white woman. The blacks felt that the white feminist pioneers were not vocal about the aspirations of the black females and, hence, unfurled a narrative of their own. hooks asserted that agitating women, apparently, weakened patriarchy but started doing the very things that they despised viz. exercise discrimination and unfurl undue authority.

The fight against patriarchy assumed such proportions that many women tried to bar other women from having even the bare minimum contact with men. Thus, separate enclosures were formed where only women militant enough to shun men with/without patriarchal tendencies were admitted. They thus wanted a utopia away from men but began bossing other women who would not toe their line. Bernardine Evaristo in her 2019 Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* aptly describes the setting up of a separatist lesbian enclosure in which one woman character asks:

why shouldn't she have a chat with the gentle community baker, Tilley, when she

went to collect bread in the mornings?
(Evaristo 97)

There were, thus, discords brewing up among women and Adrienne Rich calls for a unified resistance. She suggested that relationships among women might or might not involve the physical touch and that can be considered as lesbian continuum. Lesbianism, according to her is not necessarily only about physical proximity between the legs but can include women who take emotional and political stand for other women. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", she asserts:

I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of women-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many mote forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. (Rich 648-649)

Thus, apparently, when we see the flow of the feminist movement, it was, initially, as already mentioned, a clarion call against patriarchy. Since then, the male versus female debate or discourse has led to the opening of newer fronts in gender relations. The trans category felt that many women were transphobic and had become dictating authorities. Bernardine Evaristo, in *Girl, Woman, Other*, highlights this trouble many women had with the trans:

and another thing that bugs me are the trans troublemakers, you should have seen the stick I got when I announced my festival was for women-born-women as opposed to women-born-men, ... a man raised as a man might not feel like one but he's been treated as one by the world, so

how can he be exactly the same as us?
(Evaristo 437)

The above lines are spoken by the character Amma in the novel. She, as a woman, clearly feels that a man who felt at ease as a woman is still treated as a man by the world and can thus never be a real woman because that person has never actually experienced what it means to be a woman. Therefore, many women are generally not accommodating towards both transgenders and transsexuals because they believe unless one is not born as a woman, it is impossible to experience womanhood in toto because the trans person will still be treated as a man even after surgery (transsexual) or without it (transgender). Many women thus believe that trans women can never be real women and should thus be excluded from the description of what a 'woman' should actually be. Thus, women who tried to bring attention to their plight as the hunted now have, among them, a few who have, in turn, become the hunter hunting down gender identities who are weaker than them in the social echelons.

In gender relations, 'man', in the past, appeared as a signified holding the concept of patriarchal domination over women who, on the other hand, were demeaned as weak. If women were considered as the weaker group, then it looks like an open group because men who do not live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity are considered weak as well. R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt alluded that it is not only women who have had to involuntarily imbibe or voluntarily contest the narratives of powerful men. They posited that even men can be subjected to discrimination from other men. Just as Gramsci's 1971 concept of the hegemon meant the indoctrination of ideological constructs in victims to dominate them, hegemonic masculinity too sought to legitimize the ideas of powerful men for the rest of men. Connell and Messerschmidt writes:

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only

a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell & Messerschmidt 832)

In the concept of hegemonic masculinity as well as in Gramsci's position, violence as a *modus operandi* of the powerful is conspicuous by its absence. Instead of coercion, hegemony and hegemonic masculinity believed in persuasion. Instead of capitulation via brutal force it sought domination via legitimate institutions. In hegemonic masculinity, a set of masculine ideals would be created and these are reflections of the trends of the age. Thus, all other forms of masculinities are mapped and gauged as per those ideals set by the dominant. However, in this regard it must be mentioned that normative hegemonic masculinity is never fixed. It has poststructuralist tendencies because the ideals are subject to change. Those men who do not/ can't subscribe to the ideals are demeaned as weak. They thus fall down to the definition laid down for women in the past. 'Woman', thus, as a category appears fluid and open for accommodation. If in the past it stood for a group of biological entities born without the phallus, hegemonic masculinity ensured that even entities born with the phallus can be doomed into that category.

Women were a category invented to accommodate the weak. However, with women now actually taking center stage, many women have now crept out of that demeaning category and many men have instead fallen into it.

We understand that in the aftermath of much effort by many aware women, women's fortunes have rightfully dawned. The onus now is to smother the differences and work together keeping the interests of all in mind. Women should help each other and not fight. There should also be more discussions about those

who are not born as woman but want to become one. There should be ascension in all conditions so that we can live in a world where righteousness is assured for all.

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