

FEMINISM – A REVIEW

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Abstract: Feminism is a movement which has been originated to fight for the cause of women and for the emancipation of women. It has also occupied a prominent place in literature since the inspiration to feminism has been drawn from the writings of women. It stated in the 1880s, has undergone different phases and is in vogue even today. It has undergone different changes and many women writers have added value to it through their writings. The aim of this paper is to throw light on the different phases of feminism, the works of the women writers who had contributed to it and the changes it has undergone during its course of history.

Keywords: Feminism; waves; approaches; models; feminists.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism can be defined as a movement which advocates for the welfare of women and writes about women's issues and condemns the injustice meted out to women in the current situation. The term 'feminism' or 'feminist' is derived from the Latin word *Femina* meaning 'women' or 'having the qualities of women'. It was first coined in France in 1872 by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas as *les feminites* to refer to the then emerging movement for women's rights which was mostly limited to politics. It was then used in Netherlands and entered Great Britain in 1890. It started in the United States only in 1910. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the words feminist and feminism appeared first in 1894 & 1895 respectively. When it was introduced for the first time in United Kingdom's Daily News by getting imported from France, it was used with a negative connotation. But even before that there were several movements that were trying to gain women's rights and these could be called feminist movements though they never considered themselves to be so. According to some historians the movements fighting for the cause of women towards the end of the 19th century alone were labeled as feminist movements. They called the movements earlier to this period as "Protofeminist Movements". But there are many historians who are against the usage of this term. When there are some who argue that it reduces the significance of the movements while others argue that feminism does not have a continuous history. But there were writers writing for the cause of women even in the 15th century. In the 15th century an Italian writer Christine de Pizan was the Italian woman writer who for the first time wrote about the association of the sexes. She was the author of *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* and her works have been recognized by Simone de Beauvoir, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Modesta di Pozza di Forzi – the writers of the 16th century. The other writers who were described as protofeminists were Hannah Woolley in England, Juana Ines de la Cruz in Mexico, Anne Bradstreet and Francois Poullain de

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la Barre. During the 18th century many philosophers like Jeremy Bentham, Marquis de Condorcet and Mary Wollstonecraft defended the rights of women.

Though there are different approaches to feminism and different phases of feminism, the actual roots of feminism date back to the early 1830s. The radical anti-slavery movement called abolitionism demanded the termination of slavery. Many women played prominent roles in the movement and started realizing their own condition. In the early 19th century married women need to take their husband's consent to enter into any kind of contract and they lost their title to property or future earnings upon marriage. They did not have any rights over their children and did not have protection of any kind. Hence they mixed the idea of fighting for women's rights with the anti-slavery movement. This was not welcomed by their male comrades. Further the women who were a part of the anti-slavery movement were humiliated in the 1840 Anti-Slavery Conference held in London by not being allowed to sit in the assembly. Added to this the 13th, 14th, 15th Amendments to the constitution aimed at securing freedom for the blacks. They gave priority to black's rights with no mention of women's rights. All these led to the emergence of feminism as a movement to fight for the cause of women. It took place in three phases which are identified as three waves of feminism.

First Wave of Feminism

It refers to the period of feminist activity during the second half of 19th and the early 20th centuries in Europe and America. Its primary concern is to gain enfranchisement for women, right for women's education, better working conditions for women. In the United States, the founders of the feminist movement gave importance to the abolition of subjugation and abnegation of women rather than the patronage of women's rights.

Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir were the women writers who added momentum to the feminist movement. Virginia Woolf who was concerned about the inferior status accorded to women examined the struggle of women artists, their literary history and need for freedom in her *A Room of One's Own*. In her *Three Guineas* she identified the growth of fascism linked to the patriarchal power which shatters peace. Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* argued that women have been constructed differently by men. According to her, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman." (267) Similarly Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) discussed in detail the unfair treatment meted out to women in stereotyping women in their domestic roles and by not recognizing them as individuals and attacked the second class status accorded to women in the Western society. She was followed by Margaret Fuller who published *Women in the Nineteenth Century* in which she paved way for universality in the women's right. Influenced by his wife Harriet Taylor, John Stuart Mill wrote *The Subjection of Women* in which he justified equal rights feminism. As a result in

1848 in Seneca Falls near New York ‘Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments & Resolution’ was signed to achieve right for women suffrage. From 1850 onwards, equal rights feminism focused on women’s suffrage and women’s suffrage movements appeared in New Zealand, Germany, Poland, Austria and Sweden. As a result the women’s suffrage movement gained speed and changes were made with regard to women’s suffrage. In 1918 women above the age of 30 years with own houses were given adult franchise. But in 1928 all women above the age of 18 years were given the privilege of voting. This marked the end of first wave of feminism.

Second Wave of Feminism

The period of feminist movement from the first quarter of 1960s to the late 1980s is cited as second wave of feminism. It was led by staunch feminists like Betty Friedan, Kate Micheman and others. It was concerned with inequality, gender bias and gender discrimination in education and in the workplace. The main strength of second wave feminism was drawn from Socialist and Civil Rights movement which emerged in the 1960s in North and Central America, Europe and Australia. In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in which she voiced the discontent and disorientation felt by women who were ushered into house making positions after their graduation. The Women’s Liberation movement started in the United States merged the demands for a woman’s rights to determine her own identity and sexuality with the demands for non-discrimination of men and women both in education and the workplace. Due to this there was rapid increase in the number of women seeking higher education, establishment of academic and women’s studies courses and departments. Entry of women into politics, sociology, history and literature increased which led to the questioning of accepted standards for women and male authority. During this period, Kate Millet published her *Sexual Politics* in which she used her bleak survey of the works of male writers (D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman mailer), their approaches and predisposition to explain that sex is the synonym of politics and politics is the disparity of power in family ties.

The events that earmarked second wave feminism were:

1. Administration of the Commission on the position of women by Kennedy with Eleanor Roosevelt as the chairperson. The main objective of this commission was to prepare reports and recommendation to the council to advocate women’s right in the fields of politics, economics, public and education.
2. Passing of Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII which declared that employment discrimination on the basis of one’s race, religion and origin was illegal.
3. Passing of Title IX of the Education Act of 1972 which banned gender discrimination in the field of education.

Another feminist who gave a new shape and dimension to the feminist movement was Elaine Showlater, a outstanding feminist in the United States. She has pointed out three historical phases in Women's literary development: The Feminine phase, the Feminist phase and the Female phase. The period between 1840 and 1880 was called the Feminine phase during which the women writers emulated the prepotent tradition. The period between 1880 and 1920 was called the Feminist phase. During this period women supported minority rights and denounced the injustice meted out to women. The period from 1920 to the present is called the Female phase when the male chauvinism in the male texts was substituted by a rediscovery of women's text and women. The period of the seventies and eighties when the feminist anger is toned down is called as the Stage of Acceptance. During this period arch feminists like Betty Frieden, Julia Kristiva, Nancy Chodorow started to accept female identity. According to Julia Kristeva the first stage is labelled as liberal feminism, the second stage is termed as radical feminism and the third phase is coined as metaphysics.

Feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Betty Friedan saw the texts written by men as models of power wherein the male powers and anxieties were portrayed through female characters. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that women have been constructed differently by men. Similarly another critic Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* demystified the dominant image of the happy American suburban housewife and mother. In the 1960 with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* the focus of the feminist movement was shifted to the personal power relationship from the social and the institutional focus. If according to Simone de Beauvoir the institutions of family and marriage oppressed and dehumanized women, according to Frieden it women's own consciousness which was responsible for the above.

But there was a retreat in Frieden's attitude with her publication of *The Second Stage* in which she argues that, "there is a power in women's ability to create life, closeness to life, that men don't have..." because she felt that women were psychologically upset after breaking away from the natural cycle of womanhood. Hence she wanted women to create a 'happy family' insisting on equality.

When Betty Frieden was advocating women's return to the family, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Jean B. Miller created 'women-centered' psychology which claims that caretaking, empathy, affiliation, nurturing are the focus of female experience. Nancy Chodorow in her *The Reproduction of Mothering* talks of nurturing for a woman who nurtures and needs nurturing. According to Carol Gilligan a woman undergoes three stages based on her responsibilities to others. In the first stage, she is self-centered with her 'survival' as her primary concern. In the second stage where she is submerged in others, serving others becomes her primary concern. In the third stage where she finds authenticity in relationship, she lays the foundation of authentic emotional connections by taking responsibility of

herself and that of others. Maria Westkott in *The Feminist Legacy of Karen Horney* says that women undergo intrapsychic conflicts since they internalize and oppose their subjugation. She concludes that a woman can become a true heroine when she sheds her altruism and takes responsibility for herself.

Third Wave Feminism

Women's thought of discerned failure to second wave feminism resulted in the third wave feminism which began in the early 1990s. The term was coined by Rebecca Walker in her article "Becoming the Third Wave" in 1992 in response to a case of sexual harassment. Anita Hill who worked as an assistant with Clarence Thomas in the U.S Department of Education accused him of sexual harassment when he was nominated to the Supreme Court. But after carrying out a series of interrogations, the Senate voted in favour of him. This case aroused the feelings of Rebecca Walker who wrote the above mentioned article to seek people's attention towards sexual harassment in the work place. In the article she stated, "I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third wave feminist." Thus the third wave feminism emerged and dealt with complex issues like multi-culturalism, environmentalism and globalism which were not dealt with in the Second Wave feminism.

The first and the second waves of feminism were confined to the industrialized countries. But the third wave feminism was global. Third wave feminists called themselves as the survivors and not as the victims. When the feminists of colour like Gloria Anzaldúa, Bell Hooks, Chela Sandoval, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Luisa Accati, Maxine Hong Kingston voiced their views, a new consciousness evolved and complex issues like multi-culturalism, environmentalism and globalism which were not dealt with in the second wave became the main issues for the third wave feminists. As a result Queer theory, Coloured-women's consciousness, Womanism, Post-colonial feminism and Eco-feminism emerged out of it.

Elaine Showalter who has identified the three phases of woman's literary development has also identified the four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. According to the biological model, if the text mirrors the body, it reduces the women merely to bodies. Elaine Showalter appreciates the poets and writers who write of the female experiences of the body and rebukes those who completely ignore the female body. Her linguistic model argues that there is no contrast between the languages of men and women. Her psychoanalytic model discerns that gender discrimination is the base of the intellect. It focuses on the association of the gender to the artistic process. Similarly her cultural model describes feminist involvement in social settings, recognizing the differences among women based on class, racial, national and historical differences. In spite of these differences it offers a common experience that binds women over space and time. From these four models of difference, four types of approaches have evolved, which have come into current practice. They are Gender studies, Marxist studies,

Psychoanalytic studies and Minority studies. In all these four approaches there has been a shift of focus from the negative attack on male writing about women towards the positive delineation of women in their own writing.

Gender Studies

‘Gender studies’ is an issue of conflict. When some feminists argue that gender differences have led to female oppression, others argue that it is due to the concept of female difference. It has come into existence as an approach of feminist study due to the male critics who are willing to pursue feminist studies and the gay studies critics who take up their subject under the common name of ‘Gender Studies’. There are some critics who refuse to categorize writing as masculine or feminine. But there are some other feminists who have identified sex related writing strategies in the areas of syntax, style, imagery, narrative structure, characterization and genre preference. Some examples are when male writers are interested in closed endings; women writers are prone to open endings. Similarly when women’s logic in writing is interrelated, whereas men’s logic is ordered. Feminist critic Myra Jehlen says that some critics view classification based on gender, class and race is threatening to diminish literature and argues that an effort must be made to read for gender in the works of authors who seem unconscious of gender as an issue.

Marxist Studies

Marxism is a branch of philosophy which tries to explain things based on the influence of the society we live in. It focuses on concrete, scientific, logical explanation for all the happenings in the world. Similarly Marxist feminism concentrates on the link between literature and social realities. It considers the present capitalistic system of the West as sexually and economically exploitative. So it merges the study of class and gender and views personal identity in relation to cultural identity. According to Marxist criticism the production of literary texts is dependent on the economics of publishing and distributing texts. It believes that literary value is conditioned by social beliefs and needs and is not a transcendent property.

Psychoanalytic Feminism

It is a theory of feminism which claims that men have an inherent psychological urge to subjugate women. It claims that the seed of men’s domination over women and women’s minimal resistance to subjugation lies hidden in the human psyche. It focuses on the development of our psychic lives in order to understand and transform women’s oppression. It concentrates on early childhood development and examines how gender is constructed and practiced in societal, familial and individual levels. Psychoanalytic critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have examined female images in the world of women writers like Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte

and Emily Bronte and George Eliot and have analyzed the characteristics of women like motherhood, living within enclosures, doubling of characters and feminized landscapes and have derived that female writers often identify themselves with the literary characters they create.

Julia Kristeva, a psychoanalytic in her *Desire in Language* gives the psychoanalytic version of French feminism. She shows that the expressions centered around the mother is semiotic and it is the opposite of the Symbolic law of the father. With the help of ideas developed from Women's physical experiences, she opposes phallogentrism. Such theories attempt to connect the personal with the social.

Minority Feminist Criticism

Black feminism and Lesbian feminism come under minority feminist criticism. Lesbian Feminism is a theory of feminism based on the dismissal of systemization of heterosexism, supremacy of the nuclear family and the dearth of legal recognition granted to lesbians. It argues that lesbian identity is both personal and political. According to lesbian feminists, lesbianism is something normal and heterosexuality is abnormal for women. They argue that only lesbian feminists can offer an adequate feminist analysis. Due to these kinds of notions, lesbianism has become a barricade for many feminists. In order to clarify these demerits Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wdfe in their *Sexual Practise, Textual theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism* try to marginalize a lesbian and lesbianism.

Both lesbians and blacks have been violently attacked in Western literature and Western culture. Hence both of them accuse the feminist critics that their ideas are centered on white, upper middle class women who try to become a part of the patriarchal power structure. Both black and lesbian feminists argue that most women have more similarities with men rather than among themselves. According to Maggie Humm, the main aim of both black and lesbian feminists is to become the centre of feminist criticism. Alice Walker, one of the famous Black feminist writers has replaced the term 'feminist' with the term 'Womanist'. She argues that unlike feminists, womanists do not run away from the men of their community.

CONCLUSION

On the whole it can be observed that feminism raises fundamental questions about gender discrimination and has transformed the perceptions of life and literature. Karen Offen has rightly pointed out.

Feminism emerges as a concept that encompasses both on ideology and movement for socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society. (151)

Hence it can be envisioned that feminism as a social activity helps to build a new social order with positive approach.

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