

FEMINIST THOUGHT AND SOCIAL ACTION

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The idea of feminism essentially addresses the issue of woman's equality with man in all spheres of life. That woman has suffered a lot and discriminated against politically, socially, culturally and economically across the world, is universally acknowledged. Before the advent of democracy and socialism, societies in the east as well as the west were, by and large, feudal, patriarchal and male-dominated. Under this social order, the place of women got confined to raising children and looking after home and hearth. Consequently, the woman as gender began to be perceived as weak, docile and ultimately subservient to man. This gender-stereotype gradually led to severe exploitation and oppression of women to the detriment of their health, happiness, prestige, dignity and general wellbeing. In Indian context, the caste hierarchy, being a grim social reality, gave rise to greater exploitation of particularly the dalit and tribal womenfolk across the country. Reprehensible misogynistic practices or social evils like sati, bride-burning, female feticide and infanticide, honour-killings and of course, Devdasis are notoriously Indian perversions calling for not only greater social action allied with legal protection but also a nation-wide mass-awakening movement.

Factually speaking, Charles Fourier (1837) a French thinker, is credited with having coined the word '*Feminism*'. A variety of movements of feminist ideology have developed over the years across Europe and U.S. They vary in goals, strategies and affiliations, often overlapping and some feminists identify themselves with several branches of feminist thought. British Feminist Mary Wollstonecraft had written 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792) which could be said to be the earliest works of Feminist Philosophy. This, being one of the seminal works of Modern Feminism argued for the equal education of women, allowing them to become whole and independent people.

The English utilitarian and classical liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1781) spoke for a complete equality between sexes including the right to vote and to participate in the government. He also strongly opposed the different sexual moral standards for women and men. In his “Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation” (1781), he condemned the common practice in many countries to deny women rights because of their allegedly inferior minds. Bentham gave many examples of able female regents. In 1869, J.S. Mill wrote an essay – ‘The subjection of Women’ arguing in favour of legal and social equality between Man and Woman. Jane Austen (1817), the English novelist delineated her heroines as middle class upwardly mobile & educated women in the novels such as the “Pride and Prejudice” or *‘Emma’*

Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker have divided the history of feminism into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. First-wave feminism refers to an extended Period of feminist activity during the 19th and early 20th century in the U.K. and the U.S. Originally it focused on the promoting equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattels marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of 19th century feminists such as Voltaire de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were still active in campaigning for women’s several reproductive and economic rights at this time. In 1857, Florence Nightingale established female nurses as adjuncts to military.

In Britain, the Suffragettes and possibly more effectively the Suffragists campaigned for the women’s vote. In 1918, the Representation of the people Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928, this was extended to all women over twenty-one. In the United States, leaders of this movement included Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who each campaigned for the abolition of slavery prior to championing women’s right to vote; all were strongly influenced by Omaker thought. American first wave feminism involved a wide range of women. Some, such as Frances Willard,

belonged to conservative Christian groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance union. Others, such as Matilda Jocelyn Gage, were more radical and expressed themselves within the National Woman Suffrage Association or individually. American first – wave feminism is considered to have ended with the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1919), granting women the right to vote in all states. The term first-wave was coined retrospectively after the term second-wave feminism that focused much on fighting social and cultural inequalities.

Second-wave feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. According to Estelle Freedman, the second-wave was largely concerned with other issue of equality such as ending discrimination. The feminist activist and another Carol Hanisch coined the slogan “The Personal is Political” which became synonymous with the second-wave. Second-wave feminists saw women's cultural and Political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. During this phase liberal feminism emerged powerfully and “Happy Housewife” myth was busted. Among many triggers of this wave, the sexual revolution of the 1960s across the U.S. sparked by the development of the birth-control pill was also the one ought to be mentioned here.

“The Second Sex” written in 1949 by the French author and Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir emerged as the foundational tract of contemporary feminism. It sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. As an existentialist, she accepted Jean Paul Sartre's precept existence precedes essence; hence “One is not born a woman, but becomes one”. Her analysis focuses on the social construction of woman as the other. This de Beauvoir argues as fundamental to women's oppression. She asserts that women have historically been considered deviant and abnormal and contends that even Mary Wollstonecraft considered men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire. De Beauvoir contended that for feminism to move ahead, this attitude must be set aside.

Another revolutionary work – “The Feminine Mystique” (1963) , written by Betty Friedan criticized the idea that women could only find fulfillment through

childrearing and homemaking. According to Freidan's obituary in the New York Times, "The Feminine Mystique" "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the U.S. and countries around the world" and "is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20th Century." In the book Freidan hypothesizes that women are victims of a false belief system that requires them to find identity and meaning in their love through their husbands and children. Such a system causes women to completely lose their identity in that of their family. Freidan specifically locates this system among Post – World War II middle-class Suburban Communities.

The phrase "Women's Liberation" was first used in the U.S. in 1964 and first appeared in print in 1966. By 1968, although the term Women's Liberation Front appeared in the magazine 'Ramparts', it was starting to refer to the whole women's movement. Bra-burning also became associated with the movement, though the actual prevalence of bra-burning is debatable. One of the most African-American feminist and intellectual Gloria Jean Watkins (Who uses the pseudonym "Bell hooks) who argues that this movement glossed over race and class and thus failed to address "the issues that divided women". She highlighted the lack of minority voices in the women's movement in her book "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center" (1984).

Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s arising as a response to perceived failures of the second-wave and also as a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave. It seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second-wave essentialist definition of femininity which overemphasizes the experiences of upper middle-class white women.

A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave ideology. Third wave feminists often focus on 'Micro-politics' and challenge the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females. The third wave has its origins in the mid-1980s feminist leaders rooted in the second wave like Gloria Anzaldua, Bell Hooks, Chela Sandoval, Cherrie Moraga, Audrey Lorde, Maxine, Hong Kingston and many other black feminists sought to negotiate a space within feminist thought for consideration of race-related subjectivities.

Third Wave feminism also contains internal debates between difference feminists such as the psychologist Carol Gilligan (Who believes that there are important differences between the sexes) and those who believe that there are no inherent differences between sexes and contend that gender roles are due to social conditioning.

Feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields/ It aims to understand gender inequality and focuses our gender politics, power relations and sexuality. While providing a critique of these social and political relations, much of the feminist theory focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. Themes explored in feminist theory include discrimination Stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy. The American literacy with and feminist Elaine Showalter describes the different phases of the development of feminist theory viz., "feminist critique" 'gyro criticism' and 'gender theory'. Several sub movements of feminist ideology have developed over the years. These movements often overlap and some feminists identify themselves with several type of feminist thought Liberal Feminism seeks individual equality of men and women through political and legal reform without altering the structural of society. Issues important to liberal feminist include reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting,, education, "equal pay for equal work", affordable childcare, affordable healthcare and bringing to light the frequency of sexual and domestic violence against women.

Radical Feminism considers the male controlled capitalist hierarchy as the district feature of women's oppression and calls for the total uprooting and reconstruction of society. Gloria Steinem (Ms. Magazine), Kate Miller (Sexual Politics), Shnlamith Firestone (The Dialectic of Sex) and Germaine Greer (The Female Eunuch) were some of the champions of radical feminism.

Socialist Marxist feminism links the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exportation, oppression and labor. However, much of the work of socialist feminist has gone towards separating gender phenomenon from class phenomenon. In the late 19th and early 20th century both Clara Zefkin and Eleanor Marx were against the demonization of men and supported a proletarian revolution that would overcome as many male-female inequalities as possible.

Black feminism emerged after the early feminist movements that were led specifically by white women who advocated social changes such as women's suffrage. One of the theories that evolved out of this movement was Alice Walker's 'Womanism'. Alice Walker and other womanists pointed out that black women experienced different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women.

Post-Colonial feminism is critical of western forms of feminism, notably radical feminism and liberal feminism and their (universalisation) of female experience. They object to portrayals of women of non-western societies as passive and voiceless victims and that of western women as modern, educated and empowered.

Third-world feminism has been described as a group of feminist theories developed by feminists who acquired their views and took part in feminist politics in so-called third-world countries.

Although women from the third-world have been engaged in the feminist movement, Chandra Talpade Mohanty by Sarojani Sahoo criticize western feminism on the grounds that it is ethnocentric and doesn't take into account the unique experience of women from third-world countries. According to Mohanty, Women in the third-world feel that western feminism bases its understanding of women on "Internal racism, classism and homophobia". This discourse is strongly related to African feminism and post-colonial feminism.

Unlike Western feminism, Indians don't have any clear cut corpus of writing which can categorically be termed as "feminism" or feminist writing/theory". Indian feminism has always been looked down upon due the sparseness of theoretical writings which could grasp the crux of the problems of the Indian Women, its inevitable and amendable association with "western feminism", and the existence of a recurrent sense of evasion, ambivalence and ambiguity towards the term "feminism" itself "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1986) by Chandra Talpade Mohanty is perhaps the portrayal of the "Third World Women" as presented in western feminist works. One of Mohanty's primary concerns has been to put issues of race and racism at the heart of feminist. Politics she concludes that the

most-valuable kind of feminist research ought to avoid specious generalization about “Third World Women” or “Women in Africa”, instead take for understanding and theorizing. Experience helps people gain a cultural insight through which they are able to perceive and understand the situation in a better way, rather than relying on a false sense of “Sisterhood & shared experiences” because without due consideration of the context and situation, it is impossible to group the experiences of women together.

If experience remains vital criterion for the framing of theoretical perspectives, then the clustering of the experiences of the third world women is a necessity fulfilling this necessity Susie Tharu and K. Lalita compiled an anthology of two volumes of women writings from thirteen languages which for the first time, published in English translation, illuminate the lives of women over two millennia of Indian history and extend our understanding of literature, feminism and the making of modern India.

Feminism being a western motion, feminists are “naturally” to be condemned that’s the primary allegation which Indians bring against the western ported concept. No one question the western originated concepts of capitalism; of private ownership of land and absentee landlordism; or of the ideology of the left, the western origins of Einstein, or Marx or Lenin have never made their ideas irrelevant for us. Nor should they be considered irrelevant or out of context, for an idea cannot be confined within national or geographic boundaries.

In any case the term ‘feminism’ may be a western import, but the ‘concept’ the ‘debate’ on women is an old one and has its origin rooted in the soil of Asia since the 6th century B.C. when the issue of whether women could form the order and become nuns was debated by Buddha and his followers. This debate on women’s right to education has been continuing there in many Asian countries and India is one of them.

The most distinctive feature of women’s movement is that it was initiated by men. Hence, the struggle did not acquire the overtones of gender warfare’s as it did in the west. It does not mean that the situation of women in India is satisfactory with the arrival of “westernised” feminism in India soon afterwards in the mid-seventies, several of Indian women turned away from the cause. Most Indian women have

reacted in three ways – first their disapproval of feminist anger, second, their somewhat mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphases on patriarchy and particularly on men as the principal oppressor; and third, their relative inability to tune into the demands for equality and personal freedom. Probing the roots of such reactions is relevant from the point of view of gearing both activist feminism, and women's studies in India to the Indian ethos Indian convictions, the cultural heritage and traditional religiosity.

Drawing on existing historical baggage of Indian womanhood, Radha Kumar has described how in the course of the early decades of this century: “the westernized women was becoming the focus of opprobrium from nationalists all over the country. Sarojani Naidu and Begum Shah Nawaz both declared that the Indian women's movement was not a “feminist one like the western movement; V.Ram Krishan Rao displayed an unequivocal distaste for the “Sheer grasping suffragette”, bemoaning the loss of Sita and Savitri; and Cornelia Sorabji linked the newfound assertiveness of many Indian women with the “Western influence” (Kumar : 88) .

Thus the production of Indian womanhood as the guarantor of our cultural demarcation from the west is still with us – as a trap, a false demand for purity and authenticity that is fundamentally suspect. This sense of mismatch or discrepancy between western theories and our own contexts and questions is it after all, generically felt by practically everyone.

In the construction of Indian womanhood Prof. Jasbir Jain has added a new dimension in the study of “history” and “myths” thus history is nothing but the records and annals written by men; hence it too highlights on the value of “chastity”, “virtue” and “sacrifice” related to “women”. In the Indian context, myths too lay a great deal of emphasis on chastity, sexual abstinence and sexual fidelity. The “female sexuality has always been seen as a threat to the socio-political structures and a demarcating line has been drawn between “wifehood” and “public women”; between “domesticity” and “sexual” pleasure Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan have tried to outline the concept of feminism with Indian ness.

Indian are so biased and prejudiced against the concept “feminism” that they mark out each and every person working for our importing the women's cause are inevitably tabooed as

if s/he is a terrorist, exploding anti social elements and ideas and corrupting Indian traditions and cultures. In fact, anyone working for women's rights irrespective of the nature of their work is automatically assumed to be conscious or unconscious feminist and allowed no choice on this issue. This is because the deformations, the terminology, the assumption, the form of struggle and institutions and even the views are explored from the west and applied to the Indian context rather uncritically. Modhu Kishwar the editor of *Manushi* – “a journal about women and society, literally abhors the term “feminists” and vehemently claims - “I do not call myself a feminist”. She personally resists this uncritical absorption of the western concept of feminism.

The reckless importation of issues, no doubt, does not fit into the Indian context. This seriously inhibits and starts the process of understanding the reality of women's lives in India where women's struggles have followed quite a different course. As a result, most often than not, feminists tend to intervene in people lives in the guise of “attacking outsiders” rather than as “caring insiders”. That is why they have failed to forge strong links with the civil society they wish to reform. No one could disagree with Kishwar's view that the use of feminism as a “label” is no guarantee of “ideological correction or of a superior group of the issues”. Hence, the ability to choose an appropriate name and definition for one's politics is an important aspect of evolving an independent self-view. Reference to Vrinda Nabar's observations is a necessity at this juncture. She has paradoxically claimed that feminism hasn't even begun in any real sense in India. The Indian Women's Movement has been far too amorphous and rambling as to threaten the status quo in any significant manner. The absence of any committed feminist and the scarcity of feminist's theory texts too may be regarded as another prime cause behind the marginal impact. Unless such a text is written, more than half of India's population remains faceless and defined rigidly in traditional androcentric terms. Several invaluable studies of women related issues have remained inaccessible or of little for interest except to scholars, researcher and those with a motivated interests in women studies. Moreover in a society still suspicious of changes in the lifestyle of its women, the implications are clear that Indian. Women do not need a corrupting militancy which is the product of an alien culture.

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