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Feminism and the struggle of women against oppression

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Abstract

The present paper deals with feminism and the struggle of women against their subjugation and domination in patriarchal societies. It is a humble attempt on the part of the researcher to have a contemporary understanding of feminism and feminist struggle highlighting thereby the apparent contradictions in feminist venture across time. The paper suggests that an overview into the development of feminist activities can help in overcoming the dilemma of converging the diverse and multifaceted grouping of ideas and actions within feminist discourses. The paper is analytic in nature and is primarily based on secondary data collected from different sources.

Key words: Feminism, struggle of women, patriarchy, gender discrimination.

Introduction: Feminism is an umbrella term with multiple emphasis and diverse affiliations. It is, in fact, a diverse and multifaceted grouping of ideas and actions, which seems to be enforced than instinctive. It is such a knot in which the constituent groups seem not only to be radically different but also powerfully opposed, their difference being not simply over the subject matter or the issues they deal with. In fact, each of the groups is unique by virtue of origin, intent, method of working and the philosophical foundation to which the group bases itself. Further, there is also intra group variance. At times, one group seems to have multiple sub-groups, each having a slightly different stand. Contemporary feminism, in a sense, has become a multifarious web, in which divergent thoughts and practices conflict and co-exist simultaneously. In other words, if we look at feminism from a contemporary perspective, it becomes not only difficult but also perilous to comprehend or define the same.

Feminism, perhaps, could be well understood in its elementary sense as “that concerns itself with women’s inferior position in the society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex” [Freedman 1]. However, such a definition, though illustrative of feminist venture, falls flat at the very onset. For one thing, discrimination against women is not a new issue neither is the fact of questioning of their inferior status within societies. Women have also been raising voices against their ill-treatment since ages. Further, the focus of attention of the feminists has also changed over the years. It is also interesting to

note that feminism is a relatively recent concept that “emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration in their social position” [Freedman 3]. Thus, to have a contemporary understanding of what feminism is about or what it concerns itself with is not an easy task. Again, an indirect way of describing feminism as a set of propositions or activities, as has been done at so far in this paper, would be to diminish the eminence of such a leading movement. An overview into the development of feminist activities, perhaps, can help us to overcome this apparent dilemma. It can help us to clarify our stand as concerns feminism and at the same time show the very edifice upon which our understanding of the same is based.

The roots: Feminism, undoubtedly, has a long history behind it. As a movement against women’s inferior position, its roots can be traced back to the late 18th Century in which there developed some awareness among women for their inferior status in the society. The publication of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and *Maria or the Wrongs of Women* (1797) bear testimony of this growing awareness among women. It is, however, not that Mary Wollstonecraft is the first author to have raised voice for women. In fact, history abounds in such writers who have raised voices against ill-treatment of women within societies. As instances, we may refer to Christine de Pizan, Marguerite de Navarre, Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, and Mary Astell, all of whom had expressed their views against women’s inferior position in the society. However, most of those early reactions, being either sporadic or ineloquent or self-absorbed, could not exert much lasting impacts. In contrast, Mary Wollstonecraft was both conscious and eloquent.

Mary Wollstonecraft was well aware that women are categorically shielded so that they cannot participate in the ‘real world’. They are targeted right from childhood because of their sex. She believed that the apparent inferiority of women is not ‘natural’, rather it is ‘inevitable’. Women are subjected to ‘mis-education’ since their birth so that they cannot grow and mature. As Mary Wollstonecraft puts it, “Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison” [Walters 33]. She was conscious that the whole idea of ‘femininity’ is a put up based upon male fantasy so as to keep women within a marginalized position. She felt that there is a greater need of addressing the oppressed state of women and the wrongs they experience. The intension of Mary Wollstonecraft is clear when she says, “I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government” [Freedman 32]. In other words, Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for a conscious and mass movement on the part of women against their domination in the society. She strongly believed that a radical change in the society is must so as to bring in woman’s emancipation and she held education as the key to such change.

About the same time when Mary Wollstonecraft was writing in Britain, women like Olympe de Gouges and Theroigne de Mericourt were struggling in France for extension of rights promised by the French Revolution to women. De Goughes’ *Declaration of the*

Rights of Woman and Citizen (1791) rigorously criticizes the French Revolution, especially for its *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789), which allegedly denied women the role of active political citizenship. She argued that women's, being individuals like man, should naturally be treated as equals and must have the same rights as men. Her overt statement "Woman has the right to mount to the scaffold; she ought equally to have the right to mount to the tribune" [Freedman 31] shows her fearless and rallying attitude as a writer devoted to women's cause. It is at this historical juncture, perhaps, rests the germs of feminism, which began to germinate towards later half of the 19th century, when women's voice was organized about the question of female suffrage. As far as the first half of the century is concerned, "too little seemed to have changed since the days of Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft" [Walters 42]. The question of education remained a crucial factor and people continued to speak eloquently against established conventions of the society.

The first wave: The second half of the 19th century witnessed notable demands for women. Education, possibility of working outside the home, reform in laws affecting married women and most crucially the right to vote were some of the issues that had been strongly pleaded for at that point of time. In 1843, Marion Reid, a married woman, published her *A Plea for Women*, in which she strongly advocates for women's rights, especially her right to suffrage and work outside the 'limited' domestic atmosphere. However, it is William Thompson and John Stuart Mill, both of whom are men, who form the central space of 19th century struggle for women's rights. In 1825 William Thompson, partly being influenced by Anna Wheeler's radical views and partly infuriated at James Mill's conservative views on woman as reflected in his *Essays on Government*, published his *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Restrain them in Political and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* in which he, as the very title of his book suggests, lays down demands for political, civil and domestic rights of women. He also held that the house operates as a kind of 'prison' for married women and urges them to come out of that enclave. John Stuart Mill, son of the 'conservative' James Mill, published his *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. Mill argued that the existing inequality between the sexes (man & woman) is anything but natural and there is no justification for not giving women the right to vote instantaneously. In fact, Mill was first to present women's petition for the vote in 1866. He, like Thompson, believed that married women are particularly vulnerable and had devoted much of his attention towards their plight in the society.

There emerged organized campaigns parallel to the demand for enfranchisement of women. Barbara Leigh Smith and the group of friends known as 'the Ladies of Langham Place' campaigned widely for women's rights to education, working possibilities, better living conditions as well as enfranchisement. They also campaigned for reforming the laws that curbed autonomy of women, especially the married ones. In December 1855, Leigh Smith along with Bessie Parkes and Anna Jameson formed Married Women's Property Committee (England's first organized feminist group) and gathered around 2,400 signatures for circulating petitions for law reform throughout England [Walters 58-59]. A strong campaign was grown in England against the Contagious Diseases Acts, the first of which had

been passed in 1864 and then extensions were made to the same in 1866 and 1869. These Acts exposed the cruelty of double sexual standard prevailed in the English soil as it conferred police the authority to arrest, detain and internally examine any woman who is suspected of being a prostitute. Women in large numbers, including Elizabeth Garrett, Florence Nightingale, and Harriet Martineau, soon began to protest and campaign against such arbitrary imposition of law.

By 1869, a Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts had been set up to exert greater pressure on reforms of law and to “dramatize the workings of the double sexual standard, with its disastrous effects on both men and women all through society” [Walters 63-64]. Josephine Butler, who published a pamphlet “The Education and Employment of Women” in 1868 arguing for better education for women and training facility to support themselves, became the group’s leader within a very short time. In 1869, she formed a Ladies National Association with other women sympathetic to women’s issues. In October 1866, Leigh Smith with some of her friends assembled at Elizabeth Garrett’s home in London and formed a suffrage committee, which, in the following year, came to be known as the London Society for Women’s Suffrage. Lydia Becker, being influenced by Leigh Smith, formed a local Women’s Suffrage Committee in Manchester at about the same time. She founded the *Women’s Suffrage Journal* in 1870, which influenced pro-suffrage groups in different places of the country including Edinburgh, Bristol, and Birmingham. Richard Pankhurst, an associate of the Manchester group, founded the *Englishwoman’s Review* in 1866. He also, in 1870, drafted the first Women’s Disabilities Removal Bill. Publication of the *Englishwoman’s Review* and the *Women’s Suffrage Journal* greatly helped to publicize the suffragists’ cause and to keep the issue of enfranchisement alive through the decades ahead.

The reformist campaigns of the suffragettes also got substantial support in the United States, in which feminist ideas began to grow side by side the anti-slavery movement. Following the 1840 World Convention on Slavery held in London, the anti-slavery activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, organized a women’s convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. There developed a tendency to draw parallels between slaves and women; and many abolitionists “campaign for rights, including the vote, for women and for blacks” [Walters 46]. In 1863 Angelina Grimke published her influential book *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States* followed by her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* published in 1865. Margaret Fuller’s *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) also made considerable impact upon the women’s right movement in America. Gradually, the states in America, one by one, began to enfranchise ‘white women’, who could vote in 11 states by 1914. As far as the ‘blacks’ are concerned, they were allowed to vote only in 1970, which the ‘white women’ achieved at the national level way back in 1920.

In 1903, the Pankhurst family founded the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) at Manchester. Though initially operated as a family organization, it gradually turned to be

highly popular and effective fighting for the vote. Besides, there were other groups like the Women's Freedom League, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and the Actresses' Franchise League, which also made significant contributions. In 1906, headquarter of the WSPU has been shifted to Clements' Inn, London; and within a year the WSPU had around 58 branches across England. Activities like poster display, mass meetings, processions, and street demonstrations began to be organized in important public gatherings at rapid succession. Gradually, the suffragettes began to adopt sporadic acts of violence, which soon turned to direct action and militancy. The militancy spread so extremely that "In early 1914, the Carnegie Library was burnt down, as well as two ancient churches and many large empty houses" [Walters 80]. However, in the mean time the First World War broke out and WSPU had to suspend its campaign for the vote. In 1918, with the end of the First World War, women over the age of 30 were given the vote, which they finally achieved on equal terms in March 1928.

In the intervening period, between their partial and full rights to suffrage, women continued their struggle and also achieved some significant accomplishment. In 1919, the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act has been passed, which opened numerous professions, including the civil service, to women. In 1923, a Matrimonial Causes Act set equal grounds for divorce between men and women. The decade of 1920s also saw coming out of a good number of magazines directed at women. *Woman and Home*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Time and Tide* (which included Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Rose Macaulay) are few to be mentioned. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) came towards the last part of this decade, at a time when 'women' had already achieved their right to vote in England.

The struggle against women's inferior position in the society covering roughly the period of late 19th Century and early 20th Century is often termed as First Wave Feminism. It was, in spirit, concerned with 'equal rights for women', notably the right of the suffrage.

The second wave: The Second Wave Feminism is said to have started in the 1960s and 1970s, when the term *feminism* began to be used in its extended sense, beyond institutional politics. Mention must be made in this context that "in England, right up until the 1960s at least, the word 'feminist' was usually pejorative" [Walters 2]. The movement in the 1960s and 1970s, under the head of 'Women's Liberation', concentrated largely on problems specific to women in their reproductive and social roles. Highlighting feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s, Jane Freedman writes that in this period "protest again centered around women's inequality, although this time not only in terms of women's lack of equal political rights but in areas of family, sexuality and work" [4]. Issues more crucial to women like abortion, rape, sexual harassment, health care, child birth and child rearing etc. began to be addressed alongside the age old demand for education. Patriarchy came widely to be recognized as a prime factor responsible for women's subordinate position in the society; and hence, criticised. Women's social and cultural roles also came to be contested and redefined. With the slogan "the personal is political" women began to raise

consciousness about “the invidious distinction between woman’s supposed domestic sphere of home and family and the male-defined public sphere” [Brooker 101]. The public-private division in the society came to be regarded as artificial and ideologically constructed. There also developed a sense of ‘Sisterhood’ among feminist activists of many Western countries.

In 1949, Simon de Beauvoir published her *Le Deuxième Sexe* [trans. *The Second Sex*] in France. It became immediately popular and was translated into many other languages including English. *The Second Sex* initiated wholesome discussions and critical interpretations during this period. With Beauvoir’s statement “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” [Abrams 89], which was soon to become a cliché, the ideas of sex and gender came under critical scrutiny. Sex began to be associated with a person’s biological or physiological formation; while gender was recognized as having social, psychological and cultural significance. This led to identification of gender as something artificial, a ‘construct’, as against sex which has been deemed to be ‘natural’.

The idea of gender as a ‘construct’ radically transformed women’s self-perceptions, and the methods and objects of their study. In other words, gender opened up new avenues of thought and analysis for the feminists including “a critique of Patriarchy, of taken-for-granted sexist attitudes and ideologies in institutions” [Brooker 100]. In America, Mary Ellman, through her *Thinking About Woman* (1968), made dexterous and witty assessment of belittling representation of women in literature by men. Kate Millet published her *Sexual Politics* in 1970, in which she examines the working of “politics”, by which she refers to “power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of person is controlled by others” [Freedman 34], in a patriarchal society. Millet’s book, thus, criticizes patriarchy as an institution for perpetuating male dominance over women. Shulamith Firestone in her *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) argued that it is sex, rather than class, which marks the basic division in society. In England, the Australian-born Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) condemned the passivity and placidity that women often display falling victims to their sense of inferiority or ‘natural’ dependency. Juliet Mitchell in her *Woman’s Estate* (1971), argued in favour of transforming four crucial areas of women’s lives viz. production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children. Her book, written in response to the emerging Women’s Liberation movement in England just as Sheila Rowbotham’s *Liberation and the New Politics* (1970), briefly traces women’s movements in Europe (Holland, Sweden, and France) and in the United States.

Feminist scholarship, in the late 1960s and 1970s, began to grow across academic disciplines resulting in wide publication of books, articles and journals pertaining to women and their various modes of subjugation. Gender and its representation (in Literature and other forms of Arts) were explored in a range of texts at the backdrop of critical theories like Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism and Post-structuralism. This resulted in exploration of more complicated issues like questions of language, writing, class, sexuality, sexual difference, and the body. The French feminist critics, for instance, concentrated on the theory of the role of gender in writing. Hélène Cixous, for instance, in her *The Laugh of*

Medusa (1976) propounded her idea of *écriture féminine*, that is “writing which is typically, characteristically feminine in style, language, tone and feeling, and completely different from (and opposed to) male language and discourse” [Cuddon 248]. As conjectured by Cixous, the root of *écriture féminine* is to be found “in the mother, in the stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language” [Abrams 92]. The Anglo-American feminist scholars, at this point of time, were more or less concentrated on making thematic exploration of writings by and about women. Judith Fetterly, for instance, tried to bring out sexual biases in literary works and to reconstitute the ways in which literature is traditionally approached giving importance to women’s point of view in her *The Resisting Reader* (1978). There also developed a conscious attempt in the 1970s to see how women have been ‘hidden from history’ and find out a tradition of women’s writing through re-discovery and re-publication of works by women that have been ‘lost’ in oblivion. Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden from History* (1973) is a landmark in this regard. Publishing houses like Virago, Pandora and the Women’s Press have also contributed extensively by publishing novels by authors like Susan Ferrier, Harriett Martineau, Margaret Oliphant, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, Mary Sinclair and Edith Durham. Again, there were others who focused on woman *as writers*, or rather on what Elaine Showalter called *gynocriticism*, a criticism in its pursuit of “developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women” [Abrams 90-91]. Notable works in this mode include Patricia Meyer Spacks’ *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moer’s *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977); and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

The militancy of the earlier generation of feminists was lost; and there developed a gradual turn towards critical innovations in feminist writings. Simultaneously, the feminists began to take on diversified path of resistance and the difference among them became more visible and marked. In short, feminism, in its so called Second Wave, gradually turned to be moderate and polemic, but without any sign of abating.

The third wave: In the 1980s and its aftermath, feminism metamorphosed into a highly theoretical and contested issue. As the movement progressed, different feminist groups/critics came up with their own ideas of feminism and tried to inflict those in their discourse. They also tried to infuse their own ‘meaning’ upon on any term that has become an important rallying point. Elaine Showalter, for instance, in her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981) labelled *écriture féminine* as “the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text” (Hawthorn 99). Alternatively, Luce Irigaray, a native contemporary of Hélène Cixous, talked of *woman’s language* based on “the diversity, fluidity, and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure and erotic functioning of the female sexual organs” [Abrams 93]. Julia Kristeva, another contemporary French feminist critic, conceived of a *Semiotic* means of communication as opposed to the *Symbolic* language, which is ‘phallogocentric’ and male-controlled. Kristeva referred *Semiotics* to be a pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic signifying process involving *Chora* [which

in Greek denote the womb]. Toril Moi, on the other hand, provided a detailed and in-depth discussion, analysis and critique of Anglo-American and French feminist critical postulations in her *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985). Other important works that came up in the decade of 1980s include Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to literature and Art* (1980); Mitchele Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (1980); Ginet-McConnell, Borker and Furman's (eds.) *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (1980); Jane Gallop's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter of Seduction* (1982); Elizabeth Abel's (ed.) *Writing and Sexual Difference* (1982); Hester Eisenstein's *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (1985); Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other woman* (1985) and *This Sex which is Not One* (1985); Elaine Showalter's (ed.) *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, Literature and theory* (1986); Mary Eagleton's (ed.) *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (1985); and Linda Kauffman's (ed.) *Gender and Theory: Dialogues in Feminist Criticism* (1989).

The presence of men in feminist ventures has been widely discussed and debated in the 1980s. Many a feminists considered feminism to be a female prerogative and were not ready to recognize male perspectives within its ambit. However, these feminists have been severely criticized by many others. The engagement of feminists with theories of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism further raised questions about women's roles in relation to changed social conditions, exposing thereby hidden agendas of different groups of feminists across the globe. The Third World Feminists, for instance, highlighted their specific experience of oppression and criticized the Anglo-American Feminists as being racist and ignorant of their ethnic backgrounds. Development of ideas within Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory and their intervention into feminist discussions further convolute feminism, which started as a simple movement for the rights of women. The idea of sisterhood that has been so profoundly projected in the 1970s came to be discarded outright as being a 'white, middle-class, heterosexual' movement. As K. Harris notes:

Lesbians in the movement pointed out to the fact that heterosexual women had dominated and defined the agenda on sexuality... Black women wrote about how they had been silenced, and challenged the racist assumptions behind the almost universally accepted white feminist positions ... Women with disabilities, Jewish women... like Black and lesbian women, claimed their own right to organize autonomously. [Aston 74]

There was a growing sense of identity as being crucial to women and many 'identity groups' across the globe began to raise issues particular to their experience. Judith Butler, however, in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) has opposed the notion of existence of a stable feminist subject. In her own words:

If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the fundamental premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest

the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal. [Butler 9].

Butler, thus, highlights the ‘risks’ involved in considering gender to be a static and fixed criterion. Instead, she urges us to consider gender as “performative”, which has “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” [173]. Gender, understood in terms of Butler, is then a product of continuous set of acts. It is endorsed and all individuals [be a masculine or feminine or homosexual] repeatedly enact this.

Conclusion: Under the theoretical debate following the vibrant Second Wave, feminists have become self-conscious as regards their position and/or grouping. As has already been pointed out, innumerable critics and theoreticians have attempted to define feminism with respect to their own ‘political’ orientation and allegiance. Amidst these, Toril Moi’s concept of feminism as a ‘political’ standpoint bears great significance. As Moi puts, “I will suggest that we distinguish between ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics” [117].

Moi’s idea of feminism as a “political position”, politics being understood in its extended sense as opined by Kate Millet, is important in the sense that it gives us a clue to look at feminism as continuous struggle of thought and action across history. The idea of feminism as a political position have also been reinforced by Janelle Reinelt, when she argued “...to be a feminist scholar is to practice political resistance to tradition, to dominance, to patriarchy” [Godiwala xiii]. It is important to note in this context that being a woman does not entail that she is a feminist, and neither all women are feminists. Both Moi and Reinelt have aptly realized this in their theorization of feminism. Their theorization is also important in the sense that it does not fall into the narrow enclave of analyzing feminism as a specifically female domain.

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