

Feminism, politics and Sexuality: Women breaking the long held silence of peripheral existence

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Abstract: Women, since times immemorial, have been subjected to ruthless stereotyping as a paragon of feminine virtues; signifying docility, sublime and passiveness. Articulation of sexuality has been the domain of men; women were never allowed to speak for the gratification of their biological needs. There is no denying however that suppression of the biology and its very essential needs can impede with sound psychological development of the individual. Feminism especially of the first phase spurred itself into action with the sole aim of political aim: to strive for equality for women in the political scenario; franchise to cast vote and adequate representation. For democracy to be established in true spirit; the contribution of feminism could never be over winked. Women's typical stereotypical images have been shattered and they emerged victorious in political, economic and social ambits of their life. The predominant concern of the paper is to evaluate the role that feminism played in establishing faith in equality of both sexes; inverting the age old hierarchy of binary opposites. Right to equality enshrined as fundamental right in Indian constitution, bespeaks of eliminating the hiatus between both; pilling women out of their degraded spheres tantamount to men. Indian women who have been ashamed of acknowledging their own sexuality so far have been self-assertive; challenging the tradition and boldly asserting their needs even sexual.

Keywords: Feminism, Suffrage, Sexuality, Reform Acts, Coverture

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a political movement which gathered pace in 1960's world over. The famous personalities concerned with the 19th century feminism were Caroline Norton who proposed that British legal system must be altered in order to provide equal rights to women. Feminism was a shaking call for all the women slumbering in the dark caverns of degradation, humiliation and apartheid. It gave them a jolt and helped them overcome their humiliating plight. Feminism itself was ushered into existence with the intellectual and awakened minds those who have lucubrated pondering over the issues with which women at large are beset with and pained to see the deplorable condition of women. Not only in India but the world knows that the condition of women was not good. Feminism is a wakening call for the women to champion their rights. It can be defined as:

Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman. In literature it refers to any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience. The inequalities against which feminists have raised their voice of protest-legal, economic and social restriction on the basic rights of woman- have existed throughout history across the world in all civilizations. Feminism seeks to explore how through the history of mankind power and authority have come to be vested in the male, while the female has been reduced to a position of powerlessness.¹

Feminism contains divergent conundrum of theories: social, political and moral philosophy. Socially considered, feminism dwells on the theme of rooting out inequality and promotion of their interests and rights becomes the pivotal point. Though feminist theorist in academic circle concern themselves on pointing out and scripting how gender inequality occurs in society and the stereotyping of which women are the victim. Some feminists contend the point that sex is not born rather created by the so called norms of society and reverberate with what Simon de Bevoir contends: "One is not born rather becomes a women; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine."²

Feminism and Suffrage: By and large feminism is a political movement which is concerned with women as its sole aim was to provide political rights to women. As a political movement, it endeavours earnestly to attain reproductive rights, end domestic violence, entitling women with maternity leave, attaining equal pay for equal work, putting an end to the sexual harassment women are being prey to, annihilating sexual violence and sexual discrimination. Thus Feminism and politics are correlated as in fact feminism was primarily a political movement which came into force in the 19th century to provide women political rights especially 'suffrage' that is the right to vote. Feminism shot into prominence and became a household name in 1960's and 1970's. The first initial phase of feminism known as first wave feminism achieved great degree of success as it was successful in attaining suffrage for women in many countries. New Zealand for example entitled women citizens suffrage in 1893. Similarly in 1895 it notched up again success when South Australia provided it to its women citizens followed by Australia in 1902. Through Electoral Reform of Representation of the People Act 1918, United Kingdom made a revolutionary step and ended discrimination by enabling women of the right to cast their vote above the age of 30 years, though in 1928 it was modified and named as Representation of People Act 1928 that adequately women were provided this right to vote. Other considerable success of this feminism was the passing of the Act known as Sex Disqualification Act 1919 providing equal professional rights to women. The first wave feminism was spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony who promoted for the abolition of slavery in America and later switched to the objective of getting right to vote for women and proved its worth by emerging triumphant in accomplishing the objectives it set before itself. America saw the end of slavery and established equality by the end of first phase of feminism. In the convention organised by Mott and Stanton in New York for women's rights, a declaration of women's independence was formulated and two major concerns were articulated: 1) Man has been ruthless and he has not entitle women right to cast vote 2) Man has restricted women's area of liberty by giving her no share in property. Thus Feminism tried to bring democratic values. Democracy in the absence of feminism would have been tilted in favour of men and had not been a true democracy. It is Feminism with its impetus on filling the chasm between both the sexes that divorces them, had ushered in new vistas for democracy to be successful.

Reproductive Rights: These are the rights based on some of the human rights internationally recognised by many of the countries. The model for reproduction rights came from United Nations in 1968 in one of the conferences on Human Rights as it spoke of these in clear and crystalized tone of the importance of these rights. Subsequently the Proclamation of Tehran was the first official document to document and to incorporate the reproduction rights. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines reproductive rights:

Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence.³

Reproductive rights incorporate the following legal rights for the women.

1. Legalised right to have the will to decide abortion and to undergo safe abortion
2. Right to birth control
3. Right to go for willing sterilisation. No one force and coerce to undergo sterilization.
4. Right to sex education and knowledge about STD (Sexually Transmitted diseases).

In countries like India, still reproduction rights are a far cry as the womenfolk have still no access to contraceptives and safe methods of abortion. There is still much to be done in India for the reproduction rights to be achieved.

Abolition of Coverture: Coverture was a common law in England in 18th and 19th century by which a woman's right of entering into any contract with her property was usurped by that of her husband; man and woman being one soul. William Blackstone dwells on Coverture in this vein:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of

the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-French a feme-covert; is said to be covert-baron, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture. Upon this principle, of a union of person in husband and wife, depend almost all the legal rights, duties, and disabilities, that either of them acquire by the marriage. I speak not at present of the rights of property, but of such as are merely personal. For this reason, a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself: and therefore it is also generally true, that all compacts made between husband and wife, when single, are voided by the intermarriage.⁴

Feminism in India: Nayantara Sehgal opines: “Feminism in India is making tremendous impact with a less noise and drama than in the West.”⁵ Feminism in India came in the mid part of 19th century. It was divided into three phases which correspond to the following dates: **First Phase:** Started off in 1850 and continued till 1915. This phase was dominated by the aims of bringing social equality for women. It was a phase which hankered for the end of many of the social evils like Sati, Jauhar, Child marriage etc. **Abolition of Sati:** Exclusively talking about our country India, feminism brought great hopes for the women. Having a look in the history we come to know that in India feminism bore out of the need to put an end on the social evils like Sati Pratha, Child marriage and to uplift ban on widow remarriage. All these practices are like the dead carcass reeking foul in the society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda and so on protested against these practices and exerted to raise a voice; awakening people of the country to end up these rituals which were hackneyed and decayed. With their efforts a major political reform was caused that on 4th December, 1829 ‘The Bengal Sati Regulation’ was passed which declared the burning of sati as illegal in all the states of British India.

Second Phase of feminism & Gandhi: coincides with that of the freedom movement of India and continues till 1947. It was the emergence of Gandhi on the political scenario. Gandhi was a feminist as he worked for women and was in favour of their education though to a different degree. He also believed in the equality of women with men and ensured women’s participation in the political movement which he waged against the British government. He praised the feminine virtues like this when he said, “Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.”⁶ All India Women’s Conference came into existence which was hand in glove with Indian National Congress and tried for many of the political reforms for women. Women achieved the right to cast vote in 1920 in Cochin and Travancore and in 1921 in Madras Presidency.

Third phase: The post-independence period was the third phase of feminism. Women strived for certain issues to be resolved. It was political activism after independence. Rights like equal pay for equal work, to be employed in the fields where men can be employed without discrimination as women were used in the domains where no skills or technical skills were required. With their efforts they were successful in attaining many rights for themselves. **Hindu Marriage Act and Hindu Succession Act of 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 and Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971** came into force.

Hindu marriage Act (1955)- As per this act, there was brought uniformity in the marriages of the Hindus. It was enacted to end up certain incongruities in the marriages of the Hindus and to codify in clear terms the validity of the marriages. This act strengthened the integrity of women. The act lays down certain provisions:

- The age of man must be of 21 and the woman must not be less than 18.
- No one should be married at the time of marriage.
- No one should be impotent.
- No party should be incapable of giving consent. They should be sound in mind.

- The bride should not be pregnant at the time of marriage by another man. By the impact of this act thus women marriage age was fixed. Consent of women for marriage was made essential otherwise the forcible marriage was declared voidable.

Similarly equality was harbingered by the **Hindu Succession Act, 1956** which demanded parity between both sexes and made women the owner of the property so acquired; abolishing the limited ownership status. In 2005 this act was amended and the amendment confirms that daughters are equal right to attain the deceased parent's property as sons have if the deceased dies without framing a will. **Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971** further strengthened the women as this act clearly defined the provisions under which pregnancy can be aborted and checked the forcible termination of pregnancy by woman's husband or in-laws. Pregnancy cannot be aborted if the duration of pregnancy is more than 12 weeks. By this act, pregnancy can be aborted only by a registered medical practitioner under only two conditions:

1. If the pregnancy is less than 12 weeks.
 2. If pregnancy duration is more than 12 weeks but less than 20 weeks but there are conditions:
 - If two Registered medical practitioners agree that if pregnancy is continued it will impact the woman's health badly (Physical or mental health).
 - To immediately save the woman's life.
- Mental health implies if the pregnancy is caused by forcible communion that is rape.
- Pregnancy is caused by the failure in the use of contraceptives wherein the couple does not want the child and hence the birth of child will mentally be a burden to the parents.)

Abolition of Triple Talaq: Triple talaq is in vogue in Muslim community as a form of divorce which is termed as instant divorce by which a man by orally speaking, by writing or by using any electronic gadget if uses the word 'Talaq' three times, the marriage is scrapped. This Muslim law has been challenged many times by the Indian feminists and have been debated upon. It was a major achievement that on 22nd August, 2017 Supreme Court of India declared triple talaq as unconstitutional and a means to oppress womenfolk.

Marital Rape: One of the common practices women are victim of is marital rape. In many countries marital rape has been defined as offence as this very issue has garnered the attention of feminism world over. A man after getting married to a woman starts treating her as his property and takes it for granted to ravish her with or without her consent. In many of the western countries, this is deemed to be an offence as it leaves an indelible impression of negativity on the women's mind with which she presumably finds it real ticklish to continue spearheading the steering wheel of her life. Feminism contended that marriage does not entitle a man to gratify his sexual needs with his wife against her sweet consent and they raised this issue and demanded for terming it as unconstitutional and rape. In 1993 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights declared marital rape as flouting the very fundamental human rights and came out with **Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women**. The High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillai in 2012 declared that:

Violations of women's human rights are often linked to their sexuality and reproductive role. (...) In many countries, married women may not refuse to have sexual relations with their husbands, and often have no say in whether they use contraception. (...) Ensuring that women have full autonomy over their bodies is the first crucial step towards achieving substantive equality between women and men. Personal issues—such as when, how and with whom they choose to have sex, and when, how and with whom they choose to have children—are at the heart of living a life in dignity.⁷

Soviet Union criminalized marital rape in 1922, New Zealand in 1985, Ireland in 1990, New South Wales in 1981, Canada in 1983, Austria in 1989, Switzerland in 1992 and Germany in 1997. In India marital rape has not been defined as a crime. Section 375 of IPC defines marital rape a crime when the wife is below 15 years of

age. In India the victims are sent to PWDVA which stands for Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and it was brought in force in 2006. A noted Indian advocate has opined:

It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at anytime. Thus even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (or rape) as her consent is assumed. In this respect, the woman's movement has consistently demanded that the law of rape be changed. A recent judgement of a court in England indicated that rape within marriage could be an offence. Several states in U.S. have specially amended their original law to make it an offence.⁸

Feminism and Sexuality: Kate Millet has stated in *Sexual Politics*, "However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power."⁹ The sexes have played the politics: a relationship where political manoeuvres have relegated women. Women's movement i.e. feminism exerted and left no stone unturned to transform this power packed political hierarchy. Thus the women have moved from being docile, submissive and dominated to the sphere of being self-assertive. They have come out of their claustrophobic milieu to the open world peopled with energy, vitality and enthusiasm. The way they had been so stereotyped has been ripped off. They have been empowered aptly and they have known their full strengths and might. Earlier women who have been very shy in owning their own sexuality and the way their body is, have truly owned every aspect of their body and sexuality. They have decided upon themselves when and with who they need to gratify their biological needs, thanks to the marital rape laws that have so cemented their rights that they could deny the advances of their husbands and could approve if they want to satisfy their husbands or not. In many of the Indian women novelists, the aspect of sexuality has been dealt with. Though there are a number of writers writing for the women living in India and the way they are grappling with their life situations, the special mention is of Padma Shree Shashi Deshpande. She delineates the women and her condition very appropriately. Not only this, she has done justice in portraying different aspects of her living. Sarita (female protagonist from *The Dark Holds No Terrors*) and Mira (female character from *The Binding Vine*) for instance are victimized soul of marital rape. For Sarita, the psychological hurt is too heavy to contain:

The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me, a face I could not recognise. Total non-comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralysed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which over whelmed me.¹⁰

For a woman the stigma and pain that rape and especially marital rape brings in its terrain is unbearable. Sarita cannot digest the fact that the man she loved the most is her rapist at night. The same apprehension was captured in another novel where Mira poured the fear in verse form as Shashi Deshpande says: "It runs through all her writing-a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married."¹¹ In traditional Indian society if a woman used to articulate her feelings for sexual gratification was considered to be very incongruous being as women were conceptualised as a sublime and passive being and such character is thought to be misfit for her. But as women have been gradually brought on a equal plane with that of men, they have moved from periphery to the centre stage and are not ashamed to own their sexual orientation. Even in married life they are being treated on an average with equality with men. So they are opening up and voicing themselves in all matters of their sexuality. It was Sharupnakha who first voiced her sexuality but the society was so shocked to see her voice her feelings that she was disgraced. Greer opines:

It is often falsely assumed, even by feminists, that sexuality is the enemy of the female who really wants to develop these aspects of her personality, and this is perhaps the most misleading aspect of movements like the National Organization of Women. It was not the insistence upon her sex that

weakened the American woman student's desire to make something of her education, but the insistence upon a passive sexual role.¹²

The opinion held by most of the feminists about the roles that women have succinctly selected for themselves to play in the society is justified as to some of the extent women have themselves been a shareholder in their own victimization by refusing to own their own feminine self and their own very sexuality. Women have been so socialized that they themselves ingrained in their inner consciousness that they are women because of their sexuality: the way their body is; conditioning them to develop negative and inferiority about their own sex. They have internalized that they are women due to the lack of certain reproductive organs. Women most of the time have been pre occupied in believing in the fact that they are women. They felt ashamed the way their body behaves during puberty, they have failed to cope with the snares of the people at them, they could never feel confident about the aspects of their growing body- not to talk of asserting themselves as far as their sexual orientation is concerned. Society has been outrageous at the articulation of women for the gratification of their sexual needs even if a woman categorically asserts before her husband; turning the very man into tizzy; causing him to question how could his docile and shy wife think on that? It is time to rethink and ponder:

Men are visually aroused by women's bodies and less sensitive to their arousal by women's personalities because they are trained early into that response, while women are less visually aroused and more emotionally aroused because that is their training. This asymmetry in sexual education maintains men's power in the myth: They look at women's bodies, evaluate, move on; their own bodies are not looked at, evaluated, and taken or passed over. But there is no "rock called gender" responsible for that; it can change so that real mutuality--an equal gaze, equal vulnerability, equal desire--brings heterosexual men and women together.¹³

But now the times have rolled by; sweeping changes are making ripples in the society. Western countries have already metamorphosed; their women have shattered off the manacles they had worn for so long. India is grappling with certain issues. Not denying the fact that women have not transformed. Even the shy, docile and tamed image of Indian women has been defied by them. They are confident about themselves. We can conclude with the following quote that hammers the final nail and states that despite the fact much to be worked in the direction of women's rights, the contribution of feminism in political rights cannot be overlooked.

As we approach the millennium, I find it astonishing that I have been part of a movement that in less than forty years has transformed American society -- so much so that young women today seem to find it impossible to believe that women were once not seen as equal to men, as persons in their own right.¹⁴

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