



Feminism-Ideas and concepts

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Abstract

This article tries to give a brief analysis on the term feminism in order to respond to the issues concerning gender. Basically, feminism focus on women's rights and equality. Its origin is the fact that in all societies which divide the sexes into different cultural, economic or political spheres, women are always designated in the subordinated position as objects where men are treated as subjects which is always argumentative in nature. It focus on the struggle of women through the awakening of female consciousness to articulate their own identities and roles in society. Discrimination against women becomes a major hindrance to the achievements of women's advancement and development.

Key words- Feminism, gender, identity, patriarchy

Introduction

Feminism is a socio-cultural theory to formulate the issue and find solution to gender problems. "Feminism in literature refers to a mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience in it"(Kosta,p.68). The 'feminism' is a cultural construction of marginality in relation to patriarchal society. In broad sense feminism examines the social relation with reference to gender and patriarchy. It is a critical theory aimed at examining gender in society in relation to understand the position of women. Many feminism writers have considered patriarchy to be the basis on which most modern societies have been formed. They agree that it is necessary and desirable to get away from this model in order to achieve gender equality. It has been mentioned, "Feminism is a politics: a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women (the only worldwide majority to be treated as a minority), and a resolve to do something about it. Feminism has always incorporated a concern for ideas and 'consciousness raising', while also acting in the public sphere to improve the situation of women's lives". The problem of inequality between Sexes was highlighted by Mary Wollstonecraft in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) which may be termed as "manifesto of modern feminism"(Kosta,p.70). In her book she argued "women must challenge society's assumption of female inferiority and must strive to articulate their own identities and roles in society. She avers that "women's manners have been corrupted by a culture that exalts feminine inferiority" "(Kosta,p.70). The outburst of feminism in 1960s thought

the world is not a matter of hence, but the natural corollary of centuries of struggle for women rights. Among the important twentieth century feminist voices we can mention Virginia Woolf(*A Room of one's own* ,1929), Simone de Beauvoir(*The Second Sex*,1949), Kate Millet(*Sexual politics*,1969), Elaine Show alter(*A Literature of their own*,1977), and Helen Cixous (*Sorties*,1975).There were also some male writers like John Stuart Mill(*The Subjection of women* 1869) and Friedrich Engels (*The Origin of the family* ,1884), who also raised the voice about the struggle of women in social constructs of patriarchy.

Feminism has developed different branches : Radical, Liberal, Socialist, Psychological, Cultural, Lesbian, Marxist, Existentialist feminism ,etc.

Radical Feminism

Radical Feminism Theorists advocated that women's oppression is the most fundamental form of oppression and its origin is biological in nature.It claims that childbearing is the main cause for which women are dependent upon men and biological family is formed. Radical Feminism seek to abolish this biological reproduction and insists to adopt the technique of artificial reproduction .Radical feminists argue that sexuality is the root cause of a biological family and therefore biological family should be abolished. If a woman is liberated from sexuality then there is a possibility of emancipation of women from the burden of family obligation. Childbearing is the cause for women's dependency on men for survival and men take the opportunity to oppress women .

Cultural feminism

Another important branch of feminism is cultural feminism which focus on spiritual and psychological concentration of women.They claim that the culture of women is basically related with the therapy ,matriarchy, meditation, goddess worship and the study of women in literature and art which would give strength to the women community.

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminists believe that a woman should be free to choose her social role just like a man. It demands for equality between men and women in a society and there should be no discrimination of sexes. Liberal feminists want to improve the status of women to achieve liberation. Childbearing must be the responsibility of men as well as women and liberal feminists believe that the concept of women's liberation can help men also as it will free men to take the huge responsibility of their families.

Socialist Feminism

They deal with the investigation of women's position in the family, class and the status of domestic labour. They demand equal pay for equal work.They view that women should take active participation in public production which include women's domestic labour also. " According to socialist feminists, private property and class divided society are the root cause of women's subordinated position"(Kosta,p.91). They hold the view that women should struggle against capitalism and support some of the tenets of marxism related to gender.

Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminists argue that discrimination against women is due to institution of private property and so it should be abolished. According to them feminism should struggle for communism. Marxists claim that oppression is rooted in capitalism to which men are not subjected and so there should be overthrow of capitalist economic system.

Here we can mention about some famous feminist writers-

Simone de Beauvoir

Her famous book *The Second Sex*(1949) can be regarded as the creation of the feminist consciousness. She asserts that ‘women are not a minority like blacks’(Kosta,p.108). Beauvoir is not ready to accept the one sided view that the subordinate position of women is natural and universal and so she wants to awake the whole women community to their original status so that they overcome the feeling of inferiority complex and succeed in living the life of complete humanbeings. Beauvoir claims ‘women are responsible for their present state of affairs’(Bhagwat,p.68). The second part (Book-II) of her most famous work *The Second Sex* (1949) states Beauvoir’s most famous assertion, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’(Kosta,p.111). She also asserts, “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (kosta,p.112).She wants to focus the point that women should not be biologically determined on the basis of sexual differentiation.So, according to Beauvoir, “A woman’s ‘biology is not enough to give an answer to the question:Why is woman the other?’”(de Beauvoir,1981,p.69). The facts of biology take on the values that the existent,i.e.the human being,bestows upon them. Human beings are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature”(Bhagwat,p.69). Right to vote or reservation of job for women is not enough to signify women’s liberty, according to Beauvoir.

Elaine Showalter

She is best known for her works like *Feminist Criticism*(1985), *Speaking of Gender*(1989), *Introduction : The Rise of Gender (...)*, *A Literature of their Own*(1977), *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1986), *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*(1981) etc. In her different essays, Showalter argues that ‘women must work both inside and outside the male tradition simultaneously’(Kosta,p.123). She views that ‘gender is a part of culture determination which serves as inspiration’(Kosta,p.123).

Kate Millett

Millett in her famous book *Sexual Politics* (1970) identify patriarchy as a social system providing systematized and exploitation of women.Millett argues that the society is responsible for constructing male and female as two different cultures in different atmosphere and always grant patriarchy as the sole ownership of family.

Judith Butler

She is well known for her theories on power, gender, sexuality and identity. Her most influential work is *Gender Trouble:Feminism and Subversion of Identity*(1990) which has been translated into twenty seven different languages . In her work, Butler points out that “feminism had made a mistake by asserting that women were a group with common interest and characteristics. She says that instead of opening up possibilities, feminism had closed the option down”(Kosta,p.128). She strongly argue that ‘gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original’(Kosta,p.128) .

Luce Irigaray

As a French feminist, she is best known for her works like *'Speculam of the other women'* (1974) *This sex which is not One* (1977) and *'Commodities Amongst themselves'* (1977). She believes that 'all women have been historically associated with the role of 'mother' and her identity is defined according to that role'(Kosta,p.124). She express that 'negative views about women exist because of theoretical bias – not because of Nature'(Kosta,p.125). Irigaray points out that 'women are excluded from a genuine social existence as autonomous subjects and are relegated to the realm of inert, lifeless and inessential matter'(Kosta,p127).

Helene Cixous

Her two most influential essays in contemporary feminist theory are *The Laugh of Medusa* and *Sorties* published in 1975. In her theory she recognizes that patriarchy is related with power relations which is not universal but becomes a real condition. In her theory she points out that woman is always placed as passive as she doesn't exist. In her writing related to 'feminine' she announces her struggle for gender inequality.

Alice Walker

She is one of the leading voices among black American Women writers. Her famous works are *The Color Purple* (1982), *In Search of our Mother's Garden*(1983) etc. Her works focused on the struggles of black people, particularly women and their lives in a racist, sexist and violent society. Walker explores the condition of black women related to racial issues, gender bias, oppression, slavery and search for identity in her works. Walker believes that "Black feminists are not against men as they donot aim at gender war but have a positive outlook towards the possibilities of change that can be brought about in men"(Kosta,p.136)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Indian born Spivak's best known work is *Can the Subaltern Speak?* the 1988 essay, which offers a powerful meditation on and theorization of the practice of 'Sati' (the ritual immolation of widows) in India. She often focuses on the subaltern marginalized women and set up foundations in India to support literacy for indigenous women.

According to Michele Barrett, "feminism seeks to change not simply men or women or both as they exist at present,but seeks to change the relations between them"(Bhagwat,p.29). Feminism is a women's movement which struggle for equal rights involving in a fair competition with men community.However this movement has to face challenge different issues like stereotype sex role, politics of patriarchal language etc.The critics like Hole and Levine points out that "the socially unequal position of women throughout history is not the result of biology,but is due to the value which society has placed at any given time on the biological differences between the two sexes"(Bhagwat,p.30).

According to Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary, 'Feminism' is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Since the growth of feminism is usually attributed to western influence and the common names are Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich etc. who set about the task of theorizing the needs of women in a society in their feminist criticism of literature. Jasbir Jain, a renowned Indian feminist writer is of the opinion that feminist discourse in India over the past 200 years has been shaped by our colonial past, on the one hand, and our opposition to foreign domination, on the other. Also, it has always struggled to create space for women to fight against cultural imposition and religious restrictions, which underline and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression. In her feminist creation *Indigenous Roots of Feminism*, Jain deeply analyse the growth of feminist movement from historical perspective. According to Jasbir Jain, "feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realisation of self-worth. It does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on to create new ones".

It has been mentioned, "The history of the modern western feminist movement is divided into three 'Waves'. Each wave dealt with different aspects of the same feminist issues. It is customary to divide the history of feminism into a 'First', 'Second', and 'Third', wave, with each period signaling a different era in the struggle to attain equality between the sexes. Feminism was primarily a social movement for the emancipation of women. The 'first wave' comprised women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, promoting women's right to vote. The 'second wave' was associated with the ideas and actions of the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s. The second wave campaigned for legal and social equality for women. The 'third wave' is a continuation of, and a reaction to, the perceived failures of second-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s" (Buchanan, p.167).

Feminism is a significant movement in support of the fulfillment of women's rights and interests. Before the advent of feminism, women were reticent in articulating their feelings, desires and innermost thoughts as they were considered trivial. Gradually, feminist revolution have gained urgency and begin to give limelight on women's views, their lives and their rights have begun to influence the events of the world. The pioneering feminist awareness brought about by women novelists like Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Virginia Woolf and Mary McCarthy in their writings. Particularly Mary McCarthy's novels deal with the aspiring women of America who face problems and dilemmas that hampers their progress towards emancipation. In the words of Gerda Lerner, "For most of the historical time, Women is oppressed not through her reproductive sexuality- that is, through the need of society to change not simply men or women or both as they exist at present, but seeks to change the relations between them".

Women have always been the subaltern across cultural boundaries. In patriarchy, male privilege is marked as having control over protection and representation of society. Cultural representations have been designed to accommodate male preferences and patterns of gratification. Women's pleasures have been relegated to marginal position to disallow gratification and to be enfranchised. Gender has been defined by the patriarchal fathers as a social construct where women gradually realize their down trodden, subjugated, enslaved status.

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