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History of Feminism ;an introduction

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Abstract; Feminism is a range of social movements, political movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality. Feminism incorporates the position that societies prioritize the male point of view, and that women are treated unfairly within those societies. Efforts to change that include fighting gender stereotypes and seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men.

Keywords;feminism, freedom, education, empowerment.

Introduction;Feminism, rooted in the women liberation movement advocates the rights of women and that they are equal to men. It favours women's emancipation and liberation from all kinds of oppressions by men, society, culture and system. It rests on the belief that women are equal to men and rightful to enjoy all rights- existential, educational, religious, moral, socio-political, economic and human. Women have always been denied their individuality and rights in all spheres whether it is material or spiritual. She is marginalized and subjected to oppression for centuries. Even in the present time she is being denied her rights. Irrespective of the class, women are subjected to strive hard for their survival and existence in all walks of life.

She is beaten mentally as well as physically everywhere in some way or the other. Because of so much partiality and suffering women feel fragmented, victimized and fragile. Empowerment becomes essential because women lack power. The lack of power at the moral, spiritual, intellectual, financial and socio-political level is justified by referring to theories in the respective areas of knowledge. Women empowerment centers round the search of belief system, doctrines and assumptions, which have provided base to our form of life. It is related to both the theoretical and practical aspects of human inquiry.

Feminism originally is a French word which is applied to the women movement in the nineteenth century. French dramatist Alexander Dumas used this term in 1872 in a pamphlet *L'Homme femme* for the first time. It was to designate the then emerging women's movement for the rights. In the contemporary scenario, feminism is commonly used as a socio-cultural movement to gain complete equality of women with men to enjoy all rights – social, political, moral, religious, legal, economic and educational.

Struggle for freedom and equal treatment on the part of women have opened new ways of understanding. This has questioned the definition of human being in terms of rationality and analyzed the logic behind discrimination on the basis of class, culture, gender, emotion, mind and such others. Feminist literary criticism has influenced the practical aspects of human life. This theory has awakened the minds of women and made them aware of the exploitation they had to experience and undergo. Feminist theories have brought the considerable changes in the lives of women. To understand the feminist literary criticism, it is necessary to analyze and acknowledge the contributions by activists all over the world for the cause of liberation and empowerment of women. Unless there is a definite perspective towards the world in general, theorizing has no meaning.

For women empowerment, empowerment at the level of thought becomes indispensable. Most western feminist historians assert that all movements that work to obtain women's rights should be considered feminist movements. The history of the modern western feminist movements is divided into three "waves". Each is described as dealing with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave refers to the movement of the 19th through early 20th centuries, which dealt mainly with suffrage, working conditions and educational rights for women and girls. The second wave (1960s-1980s) dealt with the inequality of laws, as well as cultural inequalities and the role of women in society. The third wave of feminism (late 1980s-early 2000s (decade), is seen as both a continuation of the second wave and a response to the perceived failures.

The latter part of the eighteenth century has witnessed the rise of the earliest feminists such as Aphra Ben, Mary Stell and Mary Wollstonecraft. Perhaps the most cited feminist writer of the time was Mary Wollstonecraft, often characterized as the first feminist philosopher. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is one of the first works that can unambiguously be called feminist, although by modern standards her comparison of women to the nobility, the elite of society (coddled, fragile, and in danger of intellectual and moral sloth) may at first seem dated as a feminist argument. Wollstonecraft identified the education and upbringing of women as creating their limited expectations based on a self-image dictated by the male gaze. Wollstonecraft believed that both genders contributed to inequality. She took it for granted that women had considerable power over men, but that both would require education to ensure the necessary changes in social attitudes. Her legacy remains in the continued need for women to speak out and tell their stories. For many commentators, Wollstonecraft represents the first codification of "equality" feminism, or a refusal of the feminine, a child of the Enlightenment.

First wave

“Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* – 1929 and Simon de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* – 1949 are feminist classics.¹ Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One’s Own*, stresses on the point of a separate room or space for a woman to think, imagine, express and create her own existence and identity. She has never been given a place of her own to create her own world of experience”¹. Woolf is basically concerned with the material inequality between man and woman. She argues that women should explore their own unique and individual experiences through their writings and should not be paying attention towards comparison of their writings with men’s. She has produced another book named *Three Guineas* (1938) which too is a major contribution to feminist theory. In her first text she focuses on the historical and social context of women’s literary production and in second text she focuses on the relations between male power and profession. Woolf is of the view that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed. “She believed that when women finally achieved social and economic equality with men, there would be nothing to prevent them from freely developing their artistic talents”².

Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* establishes the principles of modern feminism. This has been highlighted that there is a fundamental symmetry between the terms 'masculine and feminine'. Her belief is that women's position is not natural, but a social construct. She emphasizes that the concept of femininity is artificially formed and shaped by custom and fashion. She also opines, "For feminists to break this patriarchal power, it is necessary to challenge men at the level of theory, but without entering the theoretical domain on men's terms."³ In the same book she emphasizes that woman is excluded from production of ideologies and symbols, confined to the role of reproduction. Hence women have always been thought of and treated as objects and subordinates to men.

Second wave

In 1963, Betty Friedan published her expose *The Feminine Mystique*, giving a voice to the discontent and disorientation many women felt in being shunted into homemaking positions after graduating from college. The beginning of second wave feminism can be traced with the publication of this book. In the book, "Friedan explored the roots of the change in women's roles from essential workforce during World War II to homebound housewife and mother after the war, and assessed the forces that drove this change in perception of women's roles"⁴. Over the following decade, the phrase and concept "Women's Liberation" began to be discussed.

Few dominant themes during second wave feminism were the omnipresence of patriarchy, lack of political organization for women and cultural politics in the way of liberation. These themes were seen running through many of the second wave writings.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* is considered to be the first major book in the USA which presents a combination of the detailed analysis of literary works and political arguments. In this book she highlights the history of women's symbolic oppression. She criticizes Lawrence, Henry Miller and Jean Genet for carrying sexual politics to literature.

Germaine Greer, one of the great feminist has put forth revolutionary ideas regarding sex and marriage. In the book, '*Female Eunuch* she opines that women should not marry. Analyzing man-woman relationship, she uses analogy of 'employer and employee'. In her opinion married women are unpaid workers for life who cannot get free from the clutches of men'⁵.

Third wave

Third wave feminism began in early 1990s. This was the outcome of young women's thought of perceived failures of the second wave. Third wave feminists challenge the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity. According to them the second wave feminism has over emphasized the experiences of upper middle class white women only and neglected overall presentation of women. Third wave feminists focus on 'micropolitics' and challenged the second wave's moral and ethical restrictions on women as to what is, or is not good for females. In the year 1991, Anita Hill accused a Afro-American man, Clarence Thomas for sexual harassment that had occurred a decade ago when Hill worked as Clarence's assistant at the US Department of education. Clarence denied the accusations and after extensive debate, the senate voted in favour of Clarence Thomas. In regard to this case Rebecca Walker published an article in issue of Ms. titled "Becoming the third wave" in the year 1992. In that she stated, "I am not a post feminism feminist. I am the third wave."⁶

This case brought to light the ongoing presence of sexual harassment in the workplace. This has awakened the minds and concerns of many people who were of the view that sexual harassment and other second wave issues had been resolved.

UN has held a series of world conferences since 1975 on women's issues, starting with the world conference of the international women's year in Mexico City. These conferences have brought women together from all over the world. Through these conferences considerable heed has been paid for the advancement of women's rights. But in successive conferences in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985), there were illustrations of deep divisions in attempting to implement principles universally. However some convergence was appearing by 1985.

These divisions amongst feminisms included; the relationship between gender oppression and oppression based on class, race and nationality, defining core common elements of feminism vs. specific political elements, defining feminism, homosexuality, female circumcision, birth and population control, the gulf between researchers and the grass roots, and the extent to which political issues were women's issues. Emerging from Nairobi was realization that feminism is not monolithic but "constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. There is and must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of women defined by them from themselves. This diversity builds on a common opposition to gender oppression and hierarchy which, however, is only the step in articulating and acting upon a political agenda."⁷

With the rise of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian feminists has emerged. Women have developed themselves according to the situations and have become advanced in various fields. They have become independent in respect of their reproductive rights. Contemporary Indian feminists are fighting for and against: individual autonomy, rights, freedom, independence, tolerance, cooperation, nonviolence, diversity, domestic violence, gender, stereotypes, sexuality, discrimination, sexism, non objectification, freedom from patriarchy, the right to an abortion, reproductive rights, control of the female body, the right to a divorce, equal pay, maternity leave, breast feeding, prostitution and education.

Women were not writing and expressing themselves earlier as they are expressing now. But the women who are raising their voice for the cause of women are still lesser in number. To be heard they need freedom, financial as well as spatial.

Western feminist movement has given a way to Feminism in Indian Literature. However the contribution made by the Indian Freedom struggle, social reforms, growing opportunity in education and job to Indian Feminism cannot be overlooked. Though western feminism had some influence on Indian feminism, it has gone beyond its western counterparts, and it is greatly shaped and influenced by the woman question of Indian context and situation—past and present.

IN the IndianEnglish literaryscene ,''Deshpande,Gita,Hariharan,Namita Gokhle,manju Kapur,Arundhati Roy,Shobha De,Anita Nair and other women novelist have castthe women in a new light in which the female characters are expressive ,strong ,self ssured ,rebellious ,ambitious educated and determined and focused on feminist themes and its related issues.''⁸ They have created their own model ,pattern and concept of feminism different from their western counterparts.

Conclusion

The study aims to contribute something new to the already existing feminist literature – whether the feminist concerns of the middle class women are different from those of the elite class, if yes, then to what extent? And if the women's concerns of both classes are the same, then how far the concept of class is going to affect the women's problems in society.

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