

## Western Feminism: A Historical Movement

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### Abstract

Feminist criticism has its origin in an attempt to expose the sexual stereotyping of women but it quickly developed and branched out into many new directions. It is only in recent decades that women's writing has attracted the critical and the intellectual attention that it actually deserves. The lost continent of the female literary tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of male dominated literature.

Since feminism is an ideology in action, it emerged as an important force in the Western world. The earliest feminists were women who were active members of the Civil Rights Movement who protested against the Vietnam war and struggled for the abolition of slavery. The sexist attitude of their male colleagues who swore about equality brought them closer to form all women groups. They realised the male strategies to keep woman subservient. An urgent need was left to acknowledge the necessity of viewing women as a separate group. This "active" feminism was a political necessity to fight racism, sexism capitalism and patriarchal society.

**Key words:** *Feminism, Ideology, Patriarchy, Movement, Gender, Analysis, Inter-disciplinary, Universal, Radical, Mindset, Commitment, Emancipation.*

### Introduction

The term 'feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, the Younger, in 1872 in a pamphlet 'L' – Homme-Femme to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. It gradually emerged to be a world wide cultural movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights – moral, religious, social, political educational, legal, economic and so on. India, too did not lag behind in this historic movement. The constitution gave women some social and economic rights as men would enjoy. But a careful close look at the

movement makes one see the underlying reality, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The crux of the problem is that man-woman relationship has on the whole, evolved through centuries on a set pattern. Lord Tennyson depicts in *The Princess* (1847) where a clear cut traditional line of demarcation is drawn between Man and Woman;

*Man for the field and woman for the hearth:*

*Man for the sword and for the needle she:*

*Man to command and women to obey:*

*All else confusion (p.78).*

American feminist criticism is marked by one of the milestones in the study of women's writing represented by Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) which brings into sharp attention the portrayal of women in canonical works. In this phenomenal study, Millet says that the essence of politics is power and the task of feminist critics and theorists is to expose the ways of male dominance over females. This dominance which Millet defines as 'patriarchy' constitutes "perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power". "The term also enables us to link our present feminist struggles and rebellion to a past and gives us the hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel. As a literary discourse, it is part of the modernist search for new modes of conceptuality to change the existing pattern of gender relationships. Feminism thus offers a fresh perspective for critical analysis linking the study of literature with real life contexts.

According to Agate Krouse literary feminism is indirectly a service to the feminist cause because it provides documentation that the traditional definitions of women are inadequate or that women suffer injustices because of their sex. It need not deal with feminism themselves nor does it need to provide a positive blue print for the reform of society (K.K.Sharma, 1996 p-193)

Ellen Morgan draws our attention to a new type of feminism which she names neo feminism. It aims at exploring the possibilities for women to "achieve authentic selfhood", and to experience "what it is like to live as a free and fully human female being" (1996; 194) In the light of all these various types of "isms" it can be maintained that feminism, to a large extent, is mentally an interdisciplinary approach through psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy, economic and literature.

The best known of the early feminist writers in Europe was Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) whose feminism was the outcome of a series of historic events and ideological debates including the discussion on women's role and the need for women's education which had voiced in Britain and France, at an earlier period. It was, however, Mary Wollstonecraft who was able to articulate the women's issues clearly in terms that were universal and radical. She asserted that woman was a fully rational human being and she claimed only one moral standard based on rationality, one measuring stick for both sexes, and she stated that what were called 'female virtues' were really not virtues at all. Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of The Rights of Women* (1792), male authors like J.S. Hill in the *Subjugation of Women* (1869) and Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of The Family* 1884 wrote about the need to rethink the role of women and social oppression against them. In the early twentieth century, Oliver Schreiner Virginia Woolf and later Simon de Beauvoir have written on the gender questions from the perspective of and oriented towards issues like education, marriage, economics sexuality and morals.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and her numerous essays openly attack patriarchal society which in her view is the root cause of educational, economic and cultural backwardness and disabilities hampering women's creative, cultural and social growth and stature. Thus, she clearly asserts that the woman's cause is also the man's cause and true happiness cannot be achieved by trying to marginalise each other. She realises that both men and women are human resources to be used for development of culture.

However, it was *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir that brought about a revolution and a sea change in the mindset of the western society, and thus it can rightly regarded as the true foundation of the present day feminism. She also said that "woman is made, not born" (1996, p-198) that is, the creature called feminine is purely the product of male oriented civilisation.

*The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which has seen as heralding feminism's second wave, also calls for a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit woman to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self. *The Feminine Mystique* says that

the highest value and other only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. Elaine Showalter draws attention to this critical revolution in the following words:

While literacy criticism and its philosophical branch, literary theory, have always been zealously guarded bastions of male intellectual endeavours, the success of feminist criticism has opened space for the authority of the women critic that extends beyond the study of woman's writing to the reappraisal of whole body of texts that make up our literary heritage.

Feminism as a precisely defined concept relating to sociological and literary studies is a phenomenon of recent development. As a critical tool feminism can provide us a new awareness of the man's role in the modern complex world. Feminism has moved from a focus on the repression of all women in general and a politics based on the concept of shared female experience to the recognition and embracing of difference within the category 'women' which removes the possibility of there being a singular truth about womanhood. The move from sameness to difference can be charted through a critique of the politics of representation a move that can be broadly be categorized as one from structuralism to post structuralism to post modernism. It is obvious from the overview above that feminism and patriarchy are intertwined and are best considered together. Their boundaries overlap. At a point, feminism is a reaction and an answer to patriarchy.

## **Conclusion**

Today, feminism must be overviewed a rapidly developing major critical ideology or system of ideas in its own right. The concept incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope. As a philosophy of life, it opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with man's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them, thereby offering a frontal challenge to patriarchal through, social organisation and control mechanism. A close scrutiny of the genesis of feminism woman's voice against injustice and inequality – unravels the fact that feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by man to suit their needs and interests regardless of women's basic needs and happiness.

The ultimate goal of feminism is to enable women to achieve self realisation self definition, self actualization, self emancipation, self-fulfillment by having freedom of choice, freedom to live a life of her own – some might think that the feminist protest and militancy taking the shape of warfare is undesirable and unhelpful for the cause of women’s self fulfillment and full development of her varied faculties - physical, emotional, moral, intellectual etc. However, strong problems call for strong remedies.

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