

'WOMANISM' A HISTORY IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The roots of feminism in India can be traced down to the colonial period. Academicians have referred to the voices against the infamous 'Sati Pratha' and finally its abolition as the first important land mark in Indian Feminist movement. Some of the educated women of pre Independent India were way ahead of their times, most of them belonged to educated families and they furthered the cause of Indian feminism. Anandibai Joshi was the first Indian woman to go abroad for education, similarly India's first suffragist movement was under the leadership of Kamini Roy. Pandita Ramabai started a shelter home to support widows, while Kadambini Ganguly is known as the first Indian woman practitioner of western medicine along with Cornelia Sorabjee, the first Indian woman advocate. Few of the critics undermine these achievements pointing out that most of them were from upper class. Our paper traces down the history of 'Womanism in India' and talks in detail about the various contributions made by leading women writers, leaders and activists. It concludes with the excessive militant feminism and how 'Womanism' has recently been failing in Indian Perspectives.

Feminism, often also called '**womanism**' was initiated officially by Simone De Beauvoir in her monumental work 'The Second Sex' in 1949, however the movement gained popularity in the 60's when it started addressing issues related to gender problems. However much before Simone de Beauvoir, it was Mary Wolstonecraft who in her 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' highlighted the battle between the sexes. Other major feminist writers are Olive Scheiner who wrote 'Women and Labour' (1911) and Virginia Woolf the writer of 'A Room of One's Own' (1929) The modern Feminist movement today focuses on women writing from the following various perspectives:

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1. Work in the area of 'women studies'/feminism (research and studies in general about the problems of women in social, cultural, economic, linguistic and other areas)
2. Women's writing, mostly literary and
3. Feminist Criticism ¹(krishnaswamy,75)

Initially when Feminism started in the west, it developed on the lines of 'Radical', 'Liberal' and 'Rational' Feminism. Radical Feminism rejects the symbolic order which is more militant in its approach. Liberal Feminism demands equal access to the symbolic order and Rational Feminism challenges the notion of male/female identity of masculinity/femininity as metaphysical, constructed and concocted. (Krishnaswamy, 77) It is important to state here that when feminism started initially it was highly militant in its approach. Its sole agenda seemed to shatter every notion of male dominated society. However, with the passing of time, and women getting educated all over the world Feminism softened a little; writers and leaders, started focusing on the 'female experience' also called 'écriture feminine' a French expression for feminine writing. Elaine Showalter in her 'Towards A Feminist Poetics' traces down the history of female writing in the west and expresses that by late 1970's there was a considerable shift of interest from 'andro texts' (books by men) to 'gyno texts' (books by women). She also gave the term 'Gynocriticism' which specially deals with women writing expressing female experiences. In her work 'Towards A Feminist Poetics' Showalter defines Gynocriticism as "In contrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture." (Showalter) Further Showalter also divides Feminism into three stages: Feminist, Feminine and Female.

It is pertinent to understand that women writing of the west has been highly successful and appreciated because the literacy rate in the west has been very high. Feminism in the west has been deep-seated in literature and literary traditions, unlike the Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka where feminism still needs a major impetus. Feminism in

India has been unfortunately mostly confined to urban areas. There is a need of its spread in the rural sections of the society as well.

The roots of feminism in India can be traced down to the colonial period. Academicians have referred to the voices against the infamous 'Sati Pratha' and finally its abolition as the first important land mark in Indian Feminist movement. Outlook Magazine in its Dec, 1995 issue did a cover story on Indian Feminism and traced down its history. Before we move ahead its essential to know the background of feminism in India:

1947 : The freedom struggle saw active participation by women.

1946-52 : Telengana agitation in which women were trained as guerrillas.

1972 : Shahada and anti-price rise agitation in Maharashtra with women in the forefront

1972 : Anti-alcohol agitation in parts of western India. Self- Employed Women's Association (SEWA) set up by Ela Bhatt.

1973 : Anti-price rise agitations in Gujarat.

1974 : Nav Nirman agitation.

1978 : First national conference of socialist feminists in Bombay.

1979 : Stri Sangharsh formed in Delhi.

1980-83: Campaigns against dowry.

1987 : Campaigns against domestic violence and rape.

Early '80s : Establishment of Centre for Women's Development Studies.

1985 : Agitations in solidarity with Shah Bano.

1986 : Movements against Muslim Women's Bill.

1987 : Agitation against sati

Late '80s : Struggle for a safe environment, demonstrations against

Early '90s : Union Carbide after the Bhopal gas tragedy.

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support widows, while Kadambini Ganguly is known as the first Indian woman practitioner of western medicine along with Cornelia Sorabjee, the first Indian woman advocate. Few of the critics undermine these achievements pointing out that most of them were from upper class.

The name of Sarala Devi Chaudharani needs to be mentioned here as the credit of starting the first women's organization in India goes to her. She started the 'Bharat Stree Mahamandal' which was later instrumental in involving women as a part of the nationalist movement. If observed critically, all these women in their own respective ways increase our understanding of feminism and also the universal acceptance for what the women took stand for.

There are few key moments initiating feminism as a worldwide movement. We wish to discuss these dates only to reflect as to how the dedicated efforts of few accountable women in the last 150 years has helped to ensure guarantee of some of the fundamental rights and benefits of women that society mostly neglected.

Starting from the year 1856 in which the 'Widow Remarriage Act' was legalized followed by 1891 when the age of 'Consent Act' was passed which increased the age of consent for all girls for sexual intercourse, from 10 years to 12 years. It was interesting that this act became a bone of contention between the Indian Nationalists who criticized that the British were trying to systematically destroy the Indian culture in the name of modernity.

In 1917, Indian Women's Association was established which demand for legal suffrage which was followed by 1927 with the formation of an All India Women's Conference. This organization was meant for the empowerment of Indian women and children. All India Women's Conference still remains an important mouthpiece of the Indian feminist movement till today with now more than one lac women.

The Child Marriage Restraints Act was passed in 1929. This act tried to stop the age old practice of underage marriages and raised the minimum age of marriage to 14. This was the first major victory for Indian women across different religions and states of British India. Moving further by few amendments in 1940 and 1978, the age was raised to 18.

The Indian National Congress during its struggle for independence promised universal adult franchise in 1931 and in 1966, India saw a woman rising to the post of Prime Minister. Smt. Indira Gandhi still holds the record of the longest serving woman Prime Minister in the World. In 1974 a Committee on the Status of Women gave its report on its observations assessing the changes brought about by the Constitution on the empowerment of Indian women on social and economic standards.

The literary writings of women writers played significant role in creating awareness among the people and side by side reducing the gulf between the thought and belief of men and women. To start with none other than, Rabindranath Tagore, his careful and deliberate portrayal of women still remains a benchmark in the Indian struggle of women against male dominance. Another writer Toru Dutt wrote systematic lyrical poetry along with novels for mature readers in both French and English language to increase the mass base. She is often accepted by many noble laureates as 'India's first poet in English'. According to few critics, some of her literary works sound a little derivative, like that of Emily Dickinson. Her unfortunate demise in young age prevented her voice to be heard too far but yet she remains a celebrated Indian English poet of the first half of 20th century. Ismat Chughtai is known for her frank portrayal of gender sexuality and for feminist tilt and blunt frankness. She represents the enlightened lady with whom some of the women today can be inspired. Mahasweta Devi had written with compassion about the tribal, Dalit, Naxals and housewives.

It is to be noticed that the arguments done in the early feminist movements and the topic of debate by the women representation in the elected bodies in India has major element of differences. In the early phase of the women's movements as observed, the discussion was mostly limited to the traditional female sphere of the society. A small section from the upper class placed the women in the traditional iconized image justifying their demands for attachment with their female qualities thereby enabling women to centralize their qualities to the public sphere in development of new image different than that of the earlier religious iconographic image. It was even augmented that the skills needed in running a household would certainly benefit the society if transferred. Slightly different arguments were raised in the debate on women's representation in the elected bodies. When women were first included in the

municipality and Panchayat, it was believed that their knowledge and experience of the domestic sphere could be utilized in the public forum.

In the debate based on women's representation in the elected bodies there is a clear parallel to be drawn to the social feminism drawn in the women's movement with the perception of Hindu depiction of women as a Devi that was fronted by even Gandhi where females were idolized as feminine figures.

However there is a clear difference in the current discussion on representation. The arguments on female's involvement earlier contained a bigger element of portrayal of women belonging to their feminist thought but today the discussion has been new and powerful elements of empirical examples are drawn. Comprehensive research on women's inclusion in the panchayati raj have suggested that the female villagers have found easy and comfortable access to female representatives rather than the male counterparts.

As the feminist organizations gained strength and benefitted from awareness and empowerment done by the government and NGOs, their presence was felt at most of the places earlier reserved for male dominated society and also played a major role in reducing levels of corruption. A proper analysis proves that the female representation reflected higher interest in safeguarding women's specific needs. Other than this the regular advocates for special female quotas developed experiences from the world as well as domestic studies.

The first world countries often claim to be leading in feminist movements but sometimes it looks like one is being discriminated for just being a male. There are many laws raising the status and level of women over men. A typical male behavior which was once an asset is now condemned.

The disparity in justice for the same crime is seriously ridiculous. If a female commits a physical abuse on male then the case will not be even reported but if vice versa happens then whole media goes after the male.. Now a day gender has become the deciding factor over the punishment on crime. Take the example of current status and laws made under divorce. Men sometimes get completely alienated and entangled in the trap of law just by a false accusation of domestic

violence which as per law requires no evidence surprisingly if it is claimed by a female. The government records clearly show abundance of false allegations.

Our research paper doesn't lead to any sign that it is anti-feminist. It actually lays stress on quality of opportunity to both men and women alike. Feminism means political and social equality. Females must be provided equal status so that they can join hands with the males to work for the development of the society and thereby the nation. It seems that there is need of Men's rights movement today to fight with the misuse of power reportedly done by the females in the name of women empowerment. Those Men who put forward their argument and logic in support of the same are tagged as misogynists and anti-feminist.

The feminist movement of today is designed in such a way to at least sound good with better ideas of equality but actually the main purpose of equality has now been left far behind. Today being a feminist is to issue statements against males and above all to criticize the males instead of advocating joint venture of both in the development of the society. It seems the very concept of feminism has lost its way. It's doing more harm to the image of the females than it was, if it was, and actually damaging the relationship between women and men more than ever.

In conclusion it can be summarized that the females in the Indian political and social arena had to develop a balance between biological equality to men and meanwhile remaining the main subject of female iconography on the lines of Hinduism. In fact only few have managed successfully the balance act as expected but most of the women have been gradually detached from the political field. On critical analysis it can be observed that majority of the women who successfully managed to pave their way into the elected bodies have been mere ornamental for a long time and to finally been left aside in the political dealings. This very process has gone through a phase of evolution through different stages and has finally returned to almost same arguments for and against the feminist rights. Still the Women's role in the political arena and the social assignments has not being clearly defined and has been regarded to be question to work out in feminine sphere. It can be said that the women's movement has still been divided along the age old traditional lines of caste and religion. There is still much to do for a strong feminist movement that can bring unification across the major gulf present in India and still there

is much to be worked upon. Indian women still have the historic opportunity to develop proper power and influence in the society.

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