



WOMEN RIGHTS AND FEMINIST MOVEMENT



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ABSTRACT

Women had to struggle a lot to become an imperative member of the society. In the past women were denied different kinds of rights. They were kept alienated, ignored and ill-treated by the patriarchal society. Feminists, with the beginning of Feminism tried to change the image and position of women from an oppressed being to an independent and important part of the society. They tried to change their position from a mother, daughter, and wife to a position where they almost showed her spark in every field equal to men. If

googled or surveyed, one can find that women have done significant development in the field of education, science and technology, economics, politics etc. The main conclusion of this paper shows that the feminists have taken tremendous efforts and pains to establish their position as a human being and important member of the society. They have tried to break the age old stereotypical image of women as a victim by giving her the social, political or economic rights.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Patriarchal society

RESEARCH PAPER

Virginia Woolf's remarkable classic, which started as simple lecture and converted into the psalm of feminist catchphrase, called "*A Room of One's Own*" (1929) in which Woolf promoted that to succeed, a woman needs three things: "Educational opportunities, a measure of independence and freedom, and money". To achieve these rights women all over the world started a movement in the European countries towards the mid of 19th century. The movement focused on women's freedom, their education, their personal issues, freedom from the patriarchal society, their socio-cultural issues. All these brainstorming discussions gave rise to feminist movement. Feminism encompasses a number of social, cultural, and political movements, theories, and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women.

Women's sufferings and their emancipation had been googled from centuries. Women are considered as subordinate to men and they have to fulfil the expectations of men. Society being patriarchal, women are suppressed resulting in gender inequality. Men as the head of the family and in turn society, considered themselves as superior or masters and women as their subordinates. Men are capable of performing all kinds of work where as women are not capable of doing any work of strength or intellect. Role women can play is only of house care taker, to rear children and other family members. She had no identity of her own; her identity is based only on her relationship with other family members. She lacks the potentialities that men possess.

Women are suppressed, submissive, subordinate, and voiceless. She was denied the rights and privileges that men are enjoying from ages. Women should be religious, possess all virtues. They are expected to be faithful in their relations. If they break the norms or rules set by the patriarchal society it is considered as sin. She will be then punished for her actions. She should not oppose her family or go against society. She is a threat to the society if she defends herself and demands her rights, liberty then she is not a virtuous woman.

Eminent scholars, philosophers, theorist have proposed their views on women and their roles. They are also of the view that men are superior to women. Men have courage,

intellect, power where as women are frivolous, meek, fragile. Aristotle as quoted by Juanita in *Psychology of Women* stated that, “women were to men as the slave to the master. That she was the unfinished man, being on a lower level of development. The male was fitted to rule by reason of his natural superiority. Women were weak of will and incapable of independence: therefore, their condition was a quite home life, the courage of a man and of a woman are, not the same” (13).

According to Bishop and Weinzweig the great thinker Socrates was also of the same view, “courage of a man is shown in commanding, of women in obeying. Silence is a women’s glory, but this is not equally the glory of men” (46).

The greatest advocate of individual freedom, Rousseau also possesses the same view as other misogynist. In his treatise ‘*Emile*’ he discussed education and the difference between male and female. He argued that, “the boy is on freedom of intellectual expression: and the girl is to be prepared for a future when she will totally dependent on upon men, at the mercy of men’s judgement. A woman’s must, therefore, be planned in relation to man. To be pleading in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in his childhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what should be taught, while she is young---- what is most wanted in a woman is gentleness. She should early learn to submit to injustice and to suffer the wrongs inflicted on her by her husband without complaint. (365-67)

A nineteenth century German Philosopher Freidrich Nietzsche also opines the same. He too argued that men and women are not equal. The woman is only subordinate to men. Women are only a medium of pleasure resulting in motherhood. He stated that, “man shall be educated for wars and women for the recreation of the warrior; everything else is false”. Bressler in his book *Literary Criticism*, states that “Beautiful woman like Cinderella must bear patiently their suffering and accept that they are victims of the circumstances of life. If they accept their lot in life, they will, in time, be rewarded.” (143)

According to Juanita in the book *Psychology of Women* states that even psychoanalyst like Sigmund Freud was of the view that ‘women should not be suggested to earn money as her domestic responsibilities demand her complete devotion.’ He further suggested that

“sending her out to work with men and to earn money would mean supposing her tenderness, delicacy, and spoiling her beauty and charm” (29). Women must perform domestic activities. Men are always considered as strong, superior, wise, intellectual and above all a master. Men will control everything on behalf of women. This discrimination results in tyrannizing, dishonouring women at every step.

According to Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871) and quoted by Bressler, that women are of a characteristic of [...] a past and lower state civilization, such are being inferior to men, who are physically, intellectually and artistically superior” (145).

Apart from these misogynists there were few others who favoured feminism. The great Greek philosopher Plato believed that woman should be treated equally and considered as human being. According to Plato as quoted by Bishop and Weinzweig;

Men and women were similar in all respects except for physical strength and the bearing and begetting of children. Therefore, female and male guardians were to be educated alike in their preparation for their assignments in the society. Women would strip for exercise as the men did and they would not bear children until the age of twenty, in contrast to the child” (44).

Thus, in history we witnessed endeavours from women for their rights. This struggle for women’s right gave birth to a movement known as ‘Feminism’. This was the movement which fought for the liberation, freedom, and equality of women. Women started defending themselves against the injustice and inequality done to them in the patriarchal society. They wanted freedom from the age old evil traditions and rules set by the patriarchy.

Various feminist movements and ideologies were established to stand for women. Women came forward to claim their rights and independence. These groups fought for their freedom, liberty, equal rights to men, right to vote, equal wages, legal rights, property rights etc. they wanted their own identity that was denied to them from ages by the society. They wanted to come out of the bondages, traditions that considered them as submissive, delicate, timid or fragile.

This outburst finds its outlet in the form of Feminism and Liberation Movement around the end of the nine tenth century. Feminism according to Jane Freedom was, “a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding amelioration in their social position”. (3)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century women of Britain and France were the first to start the freedom movement. The voiceless were given the voice through this movement. Today it is said that there is no need for feminism or any movement for women as they have all rights equal to men. But this is far beyond the truth. Women have to fight for their equal rights, against oppression for ages. Though women have achieved success and proved her ability in every field still she has to struggle to elevate her to the position men are enjoying. But still they are not completely free from bondages and rubrics set by the patriarchy.

Van Den Bergh in his book *Feminist Practice in the 21st Century* describes: “Feminism is a conceptual framework and mode of analysis that has analysed the status of women (and other disempowered group), cross-culturally and historically to explain dynamics and conditions undergirding disparities in sociocultural status and power between majority and minority population.” (xii).

The definition of feminism as given in The Oxford English Dictionary is “a state of being feminine or womanly”. According to Toril Moi “the words ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new Woman’s Movement which emerged in the late 1960’s”. Feminism has been defined by different theorists and scholars. According to Chaman Nahal in *Feminism in English Fiction*, defines feminism as:

A mode of existence in which the woman is free of the independence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises (77).

Based on the definitions given on can define feminism as a ‘movement or conceptual ideology that is concerned with women’s status in society for reaching equal rights between

women and men. Moreover, the purpose of the feminism itself is basically concerned with an effort to create a new vision that women are valuable and have the superiority equal to men'. Bressler states, "Feminism's goal is to change this degrading view of women so that a woman will realize that there are not a non-significant other, but that each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Feminist declares must define them and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts" (44).

In few words, women also have the rights to empower their role, not only in domestic work, but also as an active in social, art, political, and educational facets. Feminism is principally concerned with the problem how a woman can consider herself a "female" and also a "freeman" at the same time. Because of the fact that women are usually referred to the domestic activities and their roles as a mother and a wife, this feminism tries to lead women to a new vision that they are actually able to do what men can do and they should have more opportunities to express themselves in society without neglecting their natural role as housewives.

The feminist movement is divided into four waves. Each wave has its own unique value in demanding women's rights and liberation.

The First Wave

The first wave of feminism started in late nineteenth century. Though, it was not the first appearance of feminist ideals, it was the first political movement began in European countries. Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *Vindication of the Rights of women* played an important protagonist in feminist movement. She argued that women should be given education and equal rights. The revolutionary women came up with their demands that included right to vote, right to education, equal property rights, reproductive rights etc. The first wave feminism was very simple in its goal. They just wanted that women should be treated as human beings and not as a slave or commodity. Another important name in this wave was of Virginia Woolf. Her famous book about women rights "A Room of One's Own" (1929) in which she helped Mary Wollstonecraft proved to be a mile stone to change position of women.

The Second Wave

The second wave began in the 1960's and continued into the 1990's, after World War II. This wave focused on social equality of women and civil rights. Sexuality and reproductive rights were the major issues of the second wave. A very influential name in this period is that of Simone de Beauvoir. Her book *The Second Sex* proved to be a guiding force to enlighten women about their rights and position in society. According to her, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman and thus distinguished from gender. She suggested that gender is an identity that is gradually acquired. She argued that, "the position of women as subordination is due to her relegation to the position of man's 'Other', *The Second Sex*.

Another important pillar of feminism was Elaine Showalter. Who led the second wave movement with the concept of gynocriticism. Her book *A Literature of their Own* focuses on the social and cultural conditions under which women wrote their literature. She argued in her book that women writers were not given place or importance in the traditional canon. They were neglected in the literary canon. Women were considered incapable to do any physical or intellectual work. Many times they had to write literary work with pseudo names. But in this second phase they started writing with their own names and identities.

The Third Wave

The Third wave feminism began in around mid of the 1990. The argument of this phase was quite different. Women belonging to third world argued that there could be no sisterhood between women from Western and that of third world. Third world women were already tortured by the western women on the grounds of racism during colonialism. Kimberle Crenshaw, a gender and critical –race scholar, coined the phrase "intersectionality" in 1989. The term refers to how different kinds of oppression –like those based on gender and race- intersect with each other. First and second wave ignored the issues of racism but third wave paid attention to it. *Ain't I a Woman*, by bell hook explored black women and feminism. It completely restructured the contemporary feminist thinking. The book covers both the white and black women.

The Fourth Wave

The fourth wave started from 2012 to till date. Feminist in this group focused on the empowerment of marginalised women. Feminist in this wave raised their voice against assault and harassment, domestic violence. The 'Me Too' movement and a resurgence of attacks on women's rights many believe that they are living in a new wave. Social media played a very important role in bringing forth the issues related to harassment or assault of women to the public. Early women were afraid to talk about or expose their issues publicly. Women's role politics and economics are also remarkable. The struggles and issues of non-white women were ignored and suppressed. Trans-rights are an issues of big debates.

Conclusion

The paper mainly tried to contour some essential points related to Feminism as a movement and belief. It deals with the some altered ideas related to this concept and more importantly focusing on the historical background of feminism, its different types and waves. It sheds lights on the various moves and efforts women had taken to establish their position in the society. It gives an over view of woman's path in which they suffered a lot, they have been raped, killed and segregated. However, they were able to make themselves and all women in the world proud not because they succeed to give woman her social, economic and political rights but rather by making everyone believe that she is human being who has the right to live, to marry, to vote, to say no when she wants.

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