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Dr. Ku. Richa Shrivastava

Editor Vishwa Jagriti Mission and Life Pathway

PhD, IITR, Roorkee

Ruchilifescape, Jatkhedhi

Hoshangabad Road, Bhopal, M. P., India

richashrivastavaiitroorkee@gmail.com

Development of Feminist Demands, Activism and Movements

Abstract

The research paper posits to investigate the structures of oppression of women within their sfamily and work roles as illustrated in the feminist demands, activism and movements. In comparison to historical or ethnographic accounts of feminists, the paper scrutinizes the suppression of women within their family and work roles. Recurrent themes occurred in the accounts of feminists are: oppression of women, social stereotypes of gender, and the construction of femininity/ masculinity, women bonding and motherhood. This research paper focuses on feminism only.

The Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines the term 'feminism' as: (a) the principle that women should have political rights equals to those of men; (b) the movement to win such rights for women. The term feminism expresses the belief that women are oppressed and exploited because of their sex. Feminism opposes women's subordination to men in family and society. (Fredrick C. Mish 461). The world envisages by women is to inspire and revolt against oppression and exploitation. Feminists were criticized for the idea of women liberation from suppression.

The term feminism has been defined in various manners. Straight jacketed definition of the term is difficult to find. A.M. Jaggar suggests in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983) that Feminism “asserted the uniqueness of women, the mystical experiences of motherhood and women’s special purity” (Jaggar 5). It is in concern with woman in multiple ways. The period from 1550 – 1700 considers as early feminism. Early feminists aimed at the improvement of women conditions. They criticized misogyny and male defamation of female. Sarah Gamble states in her book, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post Feminism* (2006), “The events of the period 1550–1700 presented women with grounds upon which to challenge the inevitability of patriarchal authority” (Gamble 4). These feminists were criticized by patriarchy for their revolution against established norms and standards set up by patriarchy in society. In e- Book, *Feminism, beyond Modernism* (1944), Elizabeth A. Flynn, explains feminism as a movement that has been influenced by other traditions. It also has its influences on other traditional issues. These issues are related with class, race, ethnicity, culture and sex. There has always been misunderstanding within or beyond feminist movement because of its relationship with other traditions and other movements. Some theories overlap feminist movement. Those who feel threatened by feminist movement respond to it in negative way. Feminists devote time and energy to make clear that considerable work has to be done if woman want to achieve equality.

Keywords: Feminism, Movements, waves of feminism, patriarchy, equality.

According to Hmm, first wave feminism began in the eighteenth century with the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Basically first wave feminism is concerned with inequalities. Second wave feminism is to differentiate between the inequalities of the women in patriarchal relation (E- Book, *Feminism, beyond Modernism* 1, 2).

Third wave feminists were the groups of women feminists between 1980's and 1990's. These feminists were heirs of the cultural and political transformations of previous decades. This generation had the benefits of the women's liberation movements of the 1960's and 1970's. In 1980's and 1990's the privileged identity of black women was challenged by whiteness, masculinity and social class through two decades. Richa Shrivastava describes in her writings, *Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction* (2016) that, "Feminists of third generation understood socially constructed inequality". (Shrivastava – 2)

The significant role is played by Mary Wollstonecraft (1750-1797), John Stuart Mill (1806- 1875) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815- 1902). These thinkers played an important role to raise voices against women suppression and exploitation. Mary Wollstonecraft (1750-1797), is an early advocate of women emancipation. According to Maggie Humm, in all societies, in cultural, economic and political spheres women are less valued than men. Mary Wollstonecraft sees cultural constructions of femininity as a major contribution to women's oppression. Mary Wollstonecraft writes, "Women have been reduced to significant objects of desire" (*Feminism beyond Modernism* 1, 2). She expounds that deprived women of Europe must have equal rights as men. They were debarred from right to vote. These European women were only granted with permission to preliminary education, higher studies were restricted to them. Her entire life and her works express her concern and protest against the denial of an identity of women except those publicized by men. Her bitter experiences about 'hardships of women' represent them as weaker sex. She raised her voice against gender oppression and sexual exploitation of women. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), her book, has been criticized for its content as 'contaminating influence' on women. She wrote hopefully for the fulfilment of 'all the demands of woman's movement'. These demands comprise of education and admissions to profession because of deprived state of women in Europe. Women demanded to overcome cultural and social constraints through

securing legislative rights. Though her book did not bring major influence in women's life, it is well known for description of women subjection.

In 1869, John Stuart Mill published *The Subjection of Women*, argues that women constitute half of the population so they must deserve the right to vote. In his book, he argued the oppression and exploitation of women is wrong, unethical and immoral. Richa Shrivastava states in her thesis:

Mill's attitude was sympathetic towards women. He believed that liberty of individual was necessary for the development of society. In his book, he argued the oppression and exploitation of women is wrong, unethical and immoral. Mill's attitude was sympathetic towards women. He believed that liberty of individual was necessary for the development of society (*Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction* - 3).

The masculine domination in the family has a corrupting influence over boys. It allows males to dominate females of their family. Then the girls are abject creatures. He refused the idea of femininity as natural. He claims that. "What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing" (Gamble 18). He considers femininity as artificially constructed. He admits that men and women must be treated as equals.

He opposed the theory of 'biological determinism' which perpetuates view, that males are superior to females in family hierarchy. He supports males' superiority over females in traditional roles. Then the females are in subjugated state. He admits that men and women must be treated as equals. He advocates Women's Rights Movement by writing:

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other- is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (Mill 3).

He refused the idea of femininity as natural or biological. According to him, sexes are culturally and not biologically formed. He claims, “The true nature and capability of women must remain unknown in the highly artificial conditions in which modern societies were living.” (Gamble 18)

The developments of feminist theory and feminist movement can be divided into three waves. These waves are consequences of feminist demands, feminist movements, feminist criticism and feminist activism. The first wave of feminism is initiated from 1830 – 1920. In this period, from 1830’s to 1920’s, is also known as the period of Victorian feminism. The period of 1830 – 1920 could be best summed up as the period of first wave of feminism which is as well as known for Women’s suffrage movement or women enfranchisement. First wave of feminism is concerned with Women’s Rights Movement. The first organized movement of Women’s Rights can be said to have begun with the first Women’s Rights Movement’s convention at the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, represented on New York, in 1848. The contribution of Elizabeth Lady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony cannot be undermined in Women’s Rights Movement. They both worked and formed Women Suffrage Association in 1869. At this time, demand for the woman’s suffrage was made and a formal resolution was passed which centred the women’s movement for next seventy years. First wave feminists’ movements deal with the right to vote, legal rights of property ownership, education etc.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in her book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) makes others aware of women problems. Men have confined them within patriarchal tradition; males could not overcome their virtue of female domination. Virginia Woolf argued that the female dominating ideas of the patriarchal society thwarted women from realizing their creativity and true potential. She suggests future females will possess power. She writes against male authority and male power structure. Virginia Woolf states that the right to earn a living is the

solution of all problems of women. Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) suggests:

“All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point- a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 1). In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound –proof room, was out of question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of nineteenth century Such material difficulties were the formidable; but much worse were the immaterial. The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to, bear was in her case not indifference but hostility (*A Room of One's Own* 52).

Virginia Woolf explained that women writers had to go against the restrictions of society in order to publish their own book. Male supremacy and patriarchal ideology ultimately win out in suppressing women. Goals of women are achieved in a different way than that of men. Virginia Woolf further writes about Shakespeare who could have an imaginary sister, if she died young. Woolf thinks that: This poet who never wrote a word was buried at the cross roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women....for they are washing dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives, for great poets who do not die; they are continuing presences; they only need the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. (Woolf 105-106). Virginia Woolf ideas show first wave of feminism.

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Second wave of feminism developed, after the Second World War in several countries. Margaret Walters discusses in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (2005) Women's liberation movement was the beginning of the second wave of feminism, whereas first wave of feminist movements deal with the right to vote, legal rights of

property ownership, education etc. The second wave of feminists talk about socio – cultural conditioning. Second wave feminists inquire whether the fixed roles regarding men and women are relevant or irrelevant in fulfilling the family and societal responsibilities. (*Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction - 5*)

Whether women would be able to fulfil professional and family roles in comparison to their fathers and husbands? In the second wave of feminism, feminists intended to promote equality in human relations which were beforehand in favour of men. Second wave feminists highlight the need of realizing equality between men and women in all aspects of life.

In the Second Wave of Feminism, the most famous French Writer was Simon De Beauvoir. She wrote *The Second Sex* (1949) accentuating on worldwide circumstances of women. “One is not born a woman, rather becomes one” (Beauvoir 295). Simone De Beauvoir explains that the biological differences are basic between men and women. She states that cultural and historical construction of women as ‘Second Sex’ or ‘Other’ is the basis of gender theory. She explained about the construction of femininity is the base for the social construction of gender theories. Her views provoked feminists and gender critics, in areas of feminism and gender studies. Beauvoir was the first to present the view, ‘becoming’ of a woman is because of social conditioning. The social roles which women perform are as a consequence of culture not as a result of gender. Woman must be regarded equivalent to men. Simone De Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex* (1949) that males and females have distinct qualities formed on the basis of historical construction and cultural influences. She considers woman as ‘other’, woman acts in subordination to him. She details:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other...The category of the other is as primordial as

consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the self and the other (Beauvoir 16).

Further stated in *Feminist Voices in Gloria Naylor's Fiction*:

Patriarchy implies certain societal customs on all biological women. Patriarchal norms and standards prove that developments of 'feminine' qualities are 'natural' in women. Certain women overcome these restricted lives of doctrines and dogmas set up by patriarchal interests. Those women are considered as 'unfeminine' and 'unnatural'. Patriarchal belief is that essence of femaleness is in 'femininity', but it is not essential for females to be feminine. (Shrivastava – 6)

“Thus the passivity that is the essential characteristics of the 'feminine' women is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned; it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and by society” (Beauvoir - 19). Even she discusses about the social construction of femininity at most of the times though her focus is not limited up to femininity. She talks about psyche of boys also.

Another major critique is Betty Friedan who talked about construction of femininity. Betty Friedan comments on the feminine nature in *The Feminine Mystique (1963)*:

...girls would not study physics: it was “unfeminine”. A girl refused a science fellowship at John Hopkins to take a job in a real- estate office. All she wanted, she said, was what every other American girl wanted to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb.

The suburban house- wife was the dream image of the young woman and the envy; it was said, of women all over the world. (Friedan 60)

Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique (1963)* answers that the White American housewives are happy? This is a myth. It explains the suburbs; “the problem has no name”. Richa Shrivastava writes in her thesis; “*Feminist Voices to Gloria Naylor's Fiction*”

(2016), “There is nothing different done by White American housewives. They are discontented with their lives. These women have glorified their roles as “Occupational: Housewife”. They did housekeeping, working, worried about her children and husband.” (*Feminist Voices to Gloria Naylor’s Fiction* - 7). Even then the women have unhappy lives. Betty Friedan’s book has been researched and written with ideas that even affluent middleclass women lived restricted lives. They are depressed because of restrictions being imposed on them.” They were frustrated by the lack of privacy in their routine, and the confinement of family life. She insisted the idea each woman must ask herself what she wishes”. (8) Then she would understand “neither her husband nor her children nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women, can give her a self” (*The Feminine Mystique* 464).

Betty Friedan’s back ground is from radical politics. She has keenly discussed social inequalities. She has been appointed as the founder member of N O W (National Organization of Women). She inspired women to participate fully in American society with men in equal partnership. Her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) made us aware about the deprived state of women in the post war period. The book’s subject is men superiority and suppression of women. It encourages women to show their potential and power to overcome the female subjugation by patriarchal society.

In her phenomenal study of *Sexual Politics* (1969), Kate Millet defines male supremacy over female. It constitutes “perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power”. She wrote about the bible myth that female is the cause of fall of men from heaven that is Eden garden, is imagination of Christianity. Christian mythology believes that Eve is fertility goddess, Eve given to Adam to be his companion, worked the ruin of mankind. Eve devours the forbidden fruit of life, Adam savours the same fruit. Flavour of fruit results in fall of man, which in turn resulted in fall of

humanity. This myth shows the ways to expel them from Eden Garden which was the Garden of God. Yet the religious books prop up male authority over female; male as a superior being. Sexiest attitude of male towards female is the cause of human suffering. Patriarchy considers females are the foundations of sexuality.

The post 1968 woman's Liberation Movements saw the emergence of the group known as *Psych ET Po*. This group emphasized the biological differences between the sexes. "Woman's difference is located in her sexuality as compared to men. Their sexuality has been repressed by patriarchal culture. Existing culture and language has repressed women's sexuality. They looked to the patriarchal culture and male language. White upper class woman do not achieve liberation by sacrificing their sexual differences". (*Psychoanalysis and politics* 56) The group's philosophy was greatly influenced by psychoanalysts especially Jacques Lanca. Freud believed that, "women can glorify them in femininity only" (*Psychoanalysis and politics* 56). This group tried to explore feminism but it has been in misdirection by patriarchy.

Germaine Greer discourages marriage and nuclear family in her book *The Female Eunuch* (1970). In *The Female Eunuch*, she illustrates the women are depended on males. They are categorized as 'an object of fantasy', this derogates their image. Then, therefore they have to take the duties as cooking, clothes, beauty, motherhood and household. She experienced, these all are monotonous and anxiety producing activities for women. Germaine Greer hoped in her book *The Female Eunuch* (1970) that a new breed of women would come upon the earth for which her analysis of sex oppression in the developed world of 20th century would be irrelevant, she expects that all women would like this type of freedom not to be conscious of them, freedom of not doing the duty of a wife. Freedom from spied, stopped or followed on the street. No society should be such where women might be teased by their male co-workers, classmates, colleagues and bosses. They should marry the person

would be chosen with their consent. They would be able to live with dignity, respect and nobility as women. Women wish for, they must have the right to run, shout, talk loudly and sit in a comfortable gesture.

Juliet Mitchell *Woman's Estate* (1971) was written in response to the emerging Woman's Liberation Movement in England. As Mitchell remarked "women came into the movement from the unspecific frustration of their own private lives, find what they thought as an individual dilemma is a social predicament" (*Woman's Estate* (1971) pg. no. N A). Juliet Mitchell elucidates women cannot argue or complain against oppression afflicted upon them. If women do not have response for their own problems, women have no right to argue against other people's problems. She cites in her book about women's movements in Europe and United States that, women are "the most fundamentally oppressed people have potentially the most revolutionary". Men are excluded from such hostile conditions. At meetings women narrate their problems and frustrations: not to realize their problems but to sort out grievances. In these all, feminist activities, females share the same platform as *women* not withstanding their race and class or personal lives. Eisenstein says that he sees:

...an element of visionary, futurist thought. This encompasses a concept of social transformation that, as part of the eventual liberation of women, will change all human relationships for better. Although centrally about women, their experience, condition, or 'estate', in Juliet Mitchell's formulation, feminism is also fundamentally about men and about social change". (Eisenstein xiv)

Conclusion

Margaret Walters writes in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (2005) that Twentieth century has witnessed a growing awareness related to woman regarding their desires, sexuality, self-actualization and destiny. Second wave feminists' dreamt of a world

which guaranteed individual identity and freedom to women. Women's effort to seek their independence and identity all over the world are termed as feminism. The authentic concerns of politically engaged feminists about equality, free expression, power in regard to social position and status, respect and subjectivity are the perceptions of feminism.

During 1980's, the third wave of feminism begins; it is influenced by post modernism. Third wave of feminism challenges the notion of "universal womanhood". Post modernism asserts that there is no one truth that could be claimed. It asks the question what is basis for universal. It has challenged the concept of patriarchy. Post modernism believes in the concept that the whole society is 'controlled by males'. This is the 'truth' in which concept lays. Postmodernism displays plurality in art. Post modern feminists are deeply related to sexism, racism, classism and other forms of exploitations.

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