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FEMINISM AND ITS PRACTICES IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Feminism's goal, perhaps, is to change this degrading view of women. So that women will also realize that they are not a non-significant other, but that instead each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Women, feminists declare, must define themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to foster such change, feminists hope to create society in which the female must be valued with the male.

Keywords: Feminism, Nationalism, Resentment, Illusion

“Just as I do not believe that women are inferior to men by nature, nor do I believe that they are their natural superiors either.”¹

Simone de Beauvoir, in 1976

Feminism can be described as a political, cultural or economic movement

aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism includes political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender biasness, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. Although the terms "feminism" and "feminist" did not gain widespread use until the 1970s, they were already being used in the public parlance much earlier; for instance, Katherine Hepburn speaks of the "feminist movement" in the 1942 film *Woman of the Year*. Mythologically, God created man in his own image, and He caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept; and God took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib which God has taken from man, He made a woman, and brought her up to the man. And Adam (proudly) said that this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman. Because she was taken out of man, so man comes first; ironically, though it is the mother who gives birth to a baby.

Adam provided name to his wife—Eve, and historically, it is said that those who name the objects, in fact, own them. It

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is an old but famous concept that ten measures of a speech descended on the earth and man took only one while women took nine. And the common belief is that a baby girl starts speaking earlier than a boy: there is another notion that boys are good at Mathematics and girls at Language.

There are all kinds of conceptions and misconceptions about the sexes expressed through philosophy and literature. To quote Aristotle:

The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities; we should look upon the female estate, as it was, a deformity, one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature. On account of its weakness it quickly approaches its maturity and old age since inferior things all reach their end more quickly.²

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, is of the view that: "Woman is the source of all folly and unreason, the siren figure that lures the male philosopher out of his appointed truth-seeking path... "Woman was God's second blunder."³(Oxford Quotations, 239)

However, in all ages women are always considered inferior and incapable of

any serious thinking; irrespective of religion, country, race, the period in which they live. More or less the same perception and sex-stereotyping is seen in even literature. Donne wrote in *Air and Angles* that the superior, God-like male intellect impresses its form upon the inert female matter. Views like, "The proper study of mankind is man." (Pope, Oxford Quotations, 252): "The child is father of the man." (Wordsworth, Oxford Quotations, 355) etc. too, show that man is generic.

Obviously, these debates that who comes first and second—are very difficult to conclude. But naturally this nicely arranged order of things may be reversed. Was man, the eternal protagonist, born of woman from her womb of fathomless emotion? Or was woman, with her deep womb of emotion, born from the rib of active man, the first created?

It is important here to discuss, in brief, the development of Women Empowerment and emergence and how gradually it started deviating from its principle and path. Women Empowerment Movement or Feminism is an ideology which seeks not only to understand the world but to change it for the advantage of women. The 1960s witnessed the phenomenal rise of women liberation movement all over the world. The feminist criticism and theory became relevant to the study of social, institutional, and personal

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power relations between the sexes. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) J.S Mill's *The Subjugation of Women*(1869), and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of Ones Own*(1929) are some of the seminal works which provide the theoretical framework to understand the phenomenon of male dominance over female.

Feminism's goal, perhaps, is to change this degrading view of women. So that women will also realize that they are not a non-significant other, but that instead each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Women, feminists declare, must define themselves and asset their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to foster such change, feminists hope to create society in which the female must be valued with the male.

It is needless to say that the biological union of man and woman creates human life and woman has equal contribution in the making, maintaining, and sustaining human life and civilization since the beginning of human settlements on this earth. She not only does her duty, as assigned by nature of bringing human life in this world but also nurtures that life

physically, emotionally and spiritually. Even today majority of women go through their life in a state of great nutritional and educational deprivation. They continue to be married off at a very early age and suffer multiple miscarriages. They have to bear weak and unreasonable number of children most of the time against their own will and are exposed to diseases, exploitation and oppression. They die in large number in the want of proper health and maternity care. As a matter of fact, the average Indian woman bears her first child before the age of 22; about 90 percent are anemic and suffer from reproductive tract infections.

However, the story of women's oppression clearly does not proceed from the colonial context, within which the ideas of Modern Indian Nationalism and Feminism took shape. Feminism had its origin in the west. Its genesis can be marked during the last decade of the 18th century, when the struggle for women's rights began. The most noteworthy work-concerning the quest for recognition of women's socio-cultural roles and struggles for women's social cultural and political rights- was just a justification of the rights of women.

The movement was cameo on the suffragette movement at the very outset of the 20th century. In 1929, Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own* came to light and was recognized as the most significant

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feminist's document. The late 1960's witnessed strengthening of the feminist struggle in Europe and America. The movement picked up political dimensions and turned aggressive and polemical in nature. The feminists felt that women had been poor sufferers of male oppression and exploitation. They expressed anger and strong resentment against injustice done to women. From demonstrative protests on the streets against oppression of women, feminism soon entered the academic circles, and became an important subject of literary debate and discussion. However, Western theories are a part of our intellectual capital for, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Phule, Ambedkar or Pundit Ramabai. During the colonial period the cooperation led to a trend of essentialising Indian culture. Hindi iconography and Sanskrit idioms denote women power and unintentionally support the communal ideology that Indian, Hindi and Sanskrit are synopses. In India, the struggle of women liberation was and is as inevitable as nationalism.

For example, Sarojini Naidu's presidential address to the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in Bombay in 1930 highlights two central themes. Firstly, the clash with the western origins of feminism and secondly, the construction of a Nationalism that removes internal differences, perceived as potential threats to

Nationalism. Naidu addressed the women's conference in the following words:

We are not weak, timid, meek women, we hold the courageous Savitri a sour ideal, and we join how Sita defied those who entertained those suspicious of her ability to keep her chastity. We possess the spirit of creative energy to legislate for the moral of the world. I think this conference is writing the history of women of the world. I am not a feminist. To be a feminist is to acknowledge that one's life has been repressed. The demand for granting preferential treatment to woman is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been on the side of men in council and in the fields of battle... We must have no mutual conflicts in our homes and abroad. We must transcend differences. We must rise above Nationalism, above religion, above sex.⁴

Exhibiting the same concern, Late Indira Gandhi, as the Prime Minister, addressed the All India Women's Conference in 1980. Her words are

I have often said that I am not a feminist, yet, in my concern for the unprivileged, how can I ignore women who, since the beginning of history, have been dominated over and discriminated against in social custom and in-laws . . . In the West,

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women's so-called freedom is often equated with imitation of man. Frankly, I feel, that, is merely an exchange of one kind of bondage for another. To be liberated, a woman must feel free to be herself, not in rivalry to man, but in the context of her own capacity and her personality. We need women to be more interested, more alive and more active, not because they are women, but because they do comprise 'half the human race. Whether they like it, or not, they cannot escape their responsibility nor should they be denied its benefits. Indian women are traditionally conservatives but they also have the genius of synthesis to adapt and absorb. That is what gives them resilience to face suffering and to meet upheavals with a degree of calm, to change constantly and yet remain changeless which is the quality of India herself.⁵

This particular speech dominates nationalists frame and re-emerges the confrontation of the Indian women with Indian nation and culture. In order to understand the concept of Feminism in India, these ideas in the definition help a lot.

Even Annie Besant was aware of an educated women's capacity to enlighten her home and the family. In an erudite article it is mentioned that:

Urbanization and industrialization have opened up new views of employment. They have led to new opportunities, which

are different from the traditional ones; where in professional flexibility is possible. The transition from attribution to achievement took place in the post-independence India.⁶

In the pre-independence Indian womanhood was stale and perverted. It was either hyperbolic or neglected. Woman did not occupy an important place in most of the Anglo-Indian novels. In Rudyard Kipling's, Kim, there is hardly any woman character. In E.M. Forster's, A Passage to India, Indian women are sketched, not drawn. The Indo-Anglican novels, of this period, present women as romantic, delightful, cultured, graceful, wise, and courageous. The novelists of this period treated women's lives, experiences and values as marginal. They assumed that literature was serious about public events than about the private life. They supposed literature by and about women were inferior to literature by and about men.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Raj Lakshmi Devi, Toru Dutt, KrupabaiSatthiannadhan, have written about the suffering women. For them women were either a Devi or a doormat. She was a stereotype of the pativrata. The women of the early Indian English novels had no individuality. Their ideal was to obey the elders and follow the traditional women. In the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Kamala Markandaya,

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woman has been pictured in the very traditional image of the Pativrata. She is an object of pity and has now ill of her own. To suffer in silence is her only life.

As the ideal of womanhood was motherhood. The Indian woman had only one facet; she was nothing, less than nothing, and she had to wait for a few decades to accept an existence and a name. With the spread of education there was a gradual erosion of faith in the traditional customs and values but it took some time for the modern notions and western culture to fill the space so created. The gulf between Indian and Western cultures shaped a transitional society neither fully modern nor fully traditional. In this context, Bhabani Bhattacharya says: "I think the women of India have more depth, more richness than the men. The transition from the old to the new, the crisis of value adaptations strikes deeper into the lives of our women than our men folk."⁷

In fact, the postcolonial India has exposed much emphasis on education, which has in turn benefited Women at least in finding good employment and good marriages. It may be true with the women who belong to well to-do families and who are highly educated. But the condition of average women has not improved much. Even though, the free India has had elected woman Prime Minister Indira Gandhi forever a decade, yet, no policies could

yield much achievement in uplifting average, under-privileged women. There is an excess of problems such as female foeticide, dowry, gender discrimination, wife-beating and several kinds of violence against women. Women are, even, today humiliated and harassed in homes as well as work places. She remains a victim of patriarchal domination. A woman in modern India is deceived into the inescapable cage of being a woman, wife, and mother.

A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood; otherwise she is professed as useless and unworthy. According to traditional Indian views, Indian women do not appear to have their independent role in society. Additionally, they must become a male appendix in order to have a role. Indian women are, thus, linked by male definition sex-segregation. The main difference between Indian and western societies are that, India women live as a part of a community, a group, and a family: first the father's family, then the husband's, and finally the joint family.

Even today, strict stress is given on arranged marriages. In case, a woman flaunts the rules and regulations of her family, she is attributed to ruin the honour of the family. Female sexuality is seen not as personal private matter, but as family concern, and sexual constraints on unmarried girls, control on their sexuality

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and the obsession with virginity, are still very common issues in Indian. Even today, when it comes to woman, the law of control is applied. The woman, in India, is confined to triple role of daughter-in-law, wife, and mother. Even in this modern era, in the traditional Hindu families, women are supposed to take their meals after their husbands; elders and children have finished eating. Such a habit and spirit of sacrifice is impressed upon women since childhood as a part of stridharma (Duties of women). Husband's left food after his eating was supposed to be like great Prasad for wives.

It is noteworthy here that Indian women poets' writing in English regarding voicing women empowerment is by and large an outcome of the various genders based on social cultural restrictions, which suppress the freedom of women and compel them to adopt to the given situations. Actually, there is no harm in saying that the modern feminist thought came into existence in Indian English poetry with Kamala Das, who appeared as a staunch rebel against the customary patriarchal arrangement in the Indian society. Of course, the avant-gardism and feminism of Indian women writers begin with Kamala Das, who broke with the romantic-idealist tradition of the pre-Independence women writers and rendered a genuine and concrete portrayal of life experience, particularly in the field of man-woman relationship. Her handling of love is candid and mostly

confessional. Most of her poems are loaded with sentiment: about pains and irritations of unfulfilled love: hurts and humiliations of conjugal life: inhumanity in sex: oppression of patriarchy and suppression of identity. Sunita Jain is another noteworthy signature among Indian women poets, who writes broadly on the various vicissitudes of love, and man-woman relationship. Her poems are branded with intense feminine feelings and female urges. But she very rarely prefers to revolt against the authority of patriarchy in such a bold and overt manner as Kamala Das and Gouri Deshpande do. She rather seeks her preference and redemption in cultivating the sense of sharing and mutual understanding with her male character. She often wavers between romance and reality. The recurrent use of irony and contrast makes her articulation forceful and convincing.

To sum up, Feminism, initially considered Gender, as a system of cultural signs or meanings allotted to sexually dimorphic bodies, but over the years it curved to see genders as a basic binary opposition, man-women, male-female, masculine-feminine, and in the past few decades it picked up the political dimension about who oppresses whom. Thus, feminism as a movement against sexism turned out to be reverse chauvinism, so, emerging an attitude of revenge towards the male dominance. It separated the human

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society into two antagonistic camps– men and women. Somewhere in due course feminism began to diverge from its sacred principles and turned contentious and destructive, rather than inculcating the spirit of mutual understanding and respect, and the sense of partnership and co-operation between man and woman, has become the order of today's generation.

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