



TRACING BACK THE ROOTS OF FEMINISM

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Abstract

The history of feminism traces back to the birth of civilization. Feminism sheds varied colours depending on time, culture and country. Feminism is an umbrella term that includes manifold movements and ideologies that aim at achieving equality in cultural, socio-economic and political arenas for women. The feminist movements across the globe have brought about great historical changes in the position of women and vice versa. Etymologically the term feminism is derived from *feminism*(Fr.) which is used by Charles Fourier in 1837. However, the word finds its origin in the Latin term, ‘feminus’ which means of women. This history involves the story of feminist movements and feminist thinkers. The history of the feminist movement is divided into three waves. Each wave is described as dealing with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave refers to the movement of the 19th century which mainly deals with suffrage, working conditions and educational rights for women and girls. The second wave of feminism deals with the inequality of laws, as well as cultural inequalities and the role of women in society. The third wave feminism is seen as the continuation of the second wave and a response to those failures. This paper deeply traces the roots of feminism in line with socio-economic conditions of the world which has paved the path to build strong women.

Keywords: Feminism, feminist movement, stereotype, waves of feminism

Introduction

Feminism is an ideology that is governed by the distinctive indigenous approaches from country to country. For example, the French feminism is known for its boldness owing to the contributions of Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigry etc. French feminist philosopher Beauvoir comes out in open protest against the subjugation of women throughout the world in conventional societies. “The Second Sex” (1949) which is initially published in French by Beauvoir is based on the existentialist perspective of feminism. Here in this essay, the first wave of feminism will be flashed through Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” and the second wave is looked through Betty

Friedan’s “The Feminist Mystique” (1963). Thus, the overall exploration is focused on the former waves and their contribution to this feminist spectacle.

Discussion

The First wave of feminism takes place in the late 19th century and early 20th century but it flashes its light back to Greek poet Sappho (612 BCE) who has written emotional and erotic poetry with female pronouns and her works have been confiscated and burned by Gregory VII in the 11th Century. There are several writers such as the author Christine de Pizan (1364-c.1430) of the book ‘The Book of the City of Ladies’ and is

cited by Beauvoir as the first woman to write about the relation of the sexes and to denounce misogyny and later writers like “Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi, Hannah Woolley, Juana Ines de la Cruz, Marie Le Jars de Gournay, Anne Bradstreet, Francois Poulin de la Barre are sometimes described as profeminists who contributed to the development of the First wave”(Kotef 496). In addition to that during the age of ‘Enlightenment’ philosophers like Jeremy Bentham, Marquis de Condorcet and Marry Wollstonecraft has brought forth the key concerns of the first wave; the right to education, the right to vote (Women’s Suffrage Movement), marriage and property laws, better working conditions and reproductive rights. Furthermore, during the Middle and the Victorian ages if an unmarried daughter remains under the father’s guardianship and if he does not marry her off, he generally sends her to a convent where she learns about to manage a house. Her ears are filled with treasures of feminine wisdom such as how to dress, how to take care of her appearance, charm and modesty. "They have the leisure to indulge in conversation, the arts, and literature; they are not formally educated, but through discussions, readings, and instruction by private preceptors or public lectures they succeed in acquiring greater knowledge than their husbands”(Beauvoir 149). During the 17th Century, women distinguish themselves as essential intellectual spheres. They are deprived to engage in the construction of the world whereas those who are intelligent and ambitious create avenues for their success later. “She was adventurous, imaginative, and as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school ... her parents came and told her to mend the stockings and not to moon about with books”. (Woolf 61) About the above quote, Shakespeare’s imaginary sister; Judith is cut off from all the privileges so as not to expand her new intellectual horizons. Thus, what Beauvoir and Woolf argue is that it was the patriarchy who

keeps the doors of success shut though women are capable of their intellectual sensibility.

As for political rights, suppression of female intellectual horizons has become a huge issue during feminist movements and before. Thus, Mary Wollstonecraft has published one of the first feminist treatises, ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Women’ (1792) in which she advocates the moral and social equality of the sexes. Her ideas shaped the thinking of suffragettes. The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 passes 12 resolutions arguing that woman is man’s equal... In addition, “John Stuart Mill in 1867 officially pronounced in favour of the vote for women” (Beauvoir 172). In countries like New Zealand, America, Sweden, Germany and Soviet Russia give a voice for women's participation to vote. However, the participation of women in public life is problematized by several factors. It is mainly through the woman’s biological factor. Female sex is used as a demeaning matter when compared to males.

Marriage and property law plays a vital role in the first wave because both have a great impact on the feminist movement and liberation. Eventually, marriage is directly connected to property law because the woman is objectified and she is treated as property. It is easier to put people in chains than to remove them if the chains bring prestige. Hence, the bourgeois woman clings to the chains and as a result, she clings to her class privileges. Beauvoir notes that unfortunately, the bourgeoisie woman believes that her liberation would weaken the bourgeoisie society. Also by liberating from males, she would condemn to work (161). Evidently, before marriage, she owns for her father and after the marriage, she owned for her husband and her property is transferred to her husband. The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys portrays how the unnamed husband (Rochester in *Jane Eyre*) marries Bertha Mason for the sake of his

advancement and then he names her as a madwoman. In addition to that in the novel "Sense and Sensibility," a more portion of the property is given to the son and not to the daughters. During the 19th century industrial revolution a new era is opened to females. Marx and Engels understand the full impact of this situation. Indeed, a woman cannot be liberated unless she takes part in production on a larger social scale and is only incidentally bound to domestic work. And this has become possible only within a larger modern industrial social scale. During past days women are entitled to work within a home environment. Therefore, it is a woman who invented simple to complex utensils. This argument is brought forth in the book "First Sex" as, "And woman ... did the weaving and she invented the pottery making. She must be credited with the planting and harvesting of grain, for while her lord and master enjoyed himself, she gathered fruits, nuts and edible seeds. Agriculture raised a settled community and surplus of provender ..." (Davis 40) so the root cause of civilization is the woman and it is not the man. However, with time women can regain their economic importance and "the machine makes this upheaval possible the difference in physical force between male and female workers is cancelled out in a great number of cases". (163).

Next, reproduction rights are emphasized in the first wave because a woman is considered merely for the reproductive role and domestic productive work. Since the beginning of our history, the woman has been consigned for domestic labour and prohibited from taking part in shaping the world is her enslavement to the generative function. "Indeed from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children and praises of motherhood are sung" (605). The situation has to be changed by prohibiting marriage as a 'career' [emphasis added] for the

woman. Unfortunately, after the marriage she takes his name; she joins his religion; integrates into his class, and her identity as a woman is erased by the patriarchal society. Thus, the pregnancy is problematized as "five minutes of pleasure: nine months of pain...It goes in more easily than it comes out" (514). It is above all a drama playing itself out in the woman between her and herself. "She experiences it both as an enrichment and a mutilation; the fetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it, she is possessed by it" (612) Moreover, Christianity overturns the moral ideas on endowing the embryo with a soul and abortion becomes a crime against the fetus. It is worth noting that the Church authorizes the killing of adult men in war and massacres is strongly encouraged. Hence, Beauvoir's famous assertion "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" is mainly because of the reproductive 'curse'. Society has named her as 'Other' or the marginalized sex. Therefore, 'The Second Sex' symbolically refers to how the male misogyny marginalized the woman as the 'Other' whereas 'The First Sex' directly pinpoints that the subject is the woman and the other is the man. The first wave of feminism is led due to several concerns in Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' and as a result, accessible birth control, expansion of educational opportunities, improved working conditions and property law are further developed in support of women though there are some backlashes. Eventually, the first wave is identified after the second wave.

The second wave of feminism is a reaction to post-war obsession with the idea of the contended housewife and suburban domesticity; a lifestyle that often isolates women and severely limits their choices and opportunities. It is begun in the early 1960 and Betty Friedan is often credited with starting this wave of the feminist movement with the publication of her book 'Feminine Mystique' in 1963. Friedan is herself

is influenced by the French philosopher Beauvoir and her book ‘The Second Sex’ (1949) which argues against the theory of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud where he claims that "anatomy is destiny"; the belief that one's biological sex automatically determines one's role in society. Second-wave feminism can be characterized as radical feminism in contrast to the first wave, where it highlights liberal and social feminism. The second Wave challenges compulsory heterosexuality, rejecting traditional gender roles and division over sex politics.

Friedan sees women's oppression as the most fundamental oppression. "They glorified in their role as women and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."... If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage or with herself. Thus, society is unconscious of the sexism and patriarchy which is rooted in American society. Though women find their problem which lies within them they are unable to admit their predicament and when they are consulted to a psychiatrist, they are unable to find the issue so those women's problems are problems that have no name. Some doctors name it "Housewife syndrome", "Housewife's blight". Even a college education is prioritized for wifehood and motherhood. Hence, the magazines' content is decided by the males and the content is the off kitchen, sex, babies, home, food, cosmetics and furniture. Those are seen as feminine goals and the words like emancipation and careers are seen as strange and unfeminine. The words like career and ambition have been made dirty words by feminine mystique. The myth of these women being "unnatural monsters" is based on the belief that to destroy the God-given subservience of women would destroy the home and make slaves of men. Therefore, according to Friedan's argument, "Education is the key to the problem that has no name". Eventually, American women's potentiality,

capability and endeavours are suppressed by the stereotypical feminine mystique.

Secondly, the key feature of Second Wave feminism is social equality. Women who have been part of the Black Civil Rights Movement, Native American Civil Rights Movement and Labour Movement can empower the Women's Movement through these experiences. However, when there is a distinction based on sex that leads to a distinction based on gender then that gender distinction creates a hierarchy. As a result of this, some of the early feminists cut their hair short and wear bloomers and try to be like men. From the lives of their mothers, they reject the place of a stereotypical woman. Some reject marriage and motherhood for themselves. "In turning against their backs on the old feminine image, in fighting to free themselves and all women, some of them become a different kind of woman. As a result, they become complete human beings". (Friedan) Moreover, due to this so-called hierarchy women fight against the bad principles of society and not against men. Thus, wearing bloomers make themselves break the gender hierarchy and it is identified as 'dress emancipation'. [Emphasis added]

Thirdly we can identify the second wave as it raises consciousness about gender-based violence, domestic abuse and marital rape. The Career woman, the woman who clamoured for equality in every sphere and react against domestic slavery is seen as a deviant from the feminine mystique. She does not like the old fashioned self-sacrificing housewife but yet she feels something hollow within herself. A woman is seen as the reproductive machine in society so that her sole duty is to breed and look after the family. However, her fulfilment is deprived and she has to sacrifice her whole time by placing herself merely as a sex object and a good caretaker. Friedan adds that "She is taken so literally that procreation becomes a cult, a career,

to the exclusion of every other kind of creative endeavour until women keep on having babies because they know no other way to create". Hence women's minds are moulded to become full-time housewives. Marital rape is seen as a bound service to a woman by a man. Men think that women as sex seekers. Therefore, orgasm is granted as a life experience to women though they do feel their lives as drudgery and hollow. Thus, Friedan outrageously problematizes about sex seeking pleasure does not revive a woman to root her identity and emancipation whereas she can understand a problem that has no name.

Fourthly, radical feminists challenge compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, they did not believe that compulsory heterosexuality mandates marriage as a successful institution because it just reinforces the power of patriarchy. "Overt homosexuality may express fear of adult responsibility...it may represent a flight from reality into absorption in bodily stimulation very similar to the autoerotic activities...people who have low self-esteem ... tend to cling to their sex because it is less frightening...for the fear of disapproval from the culture and the need to conform often drive these very people into marriage". (Friedan) As a result of this we can understand that heterosexuality as a political institution rather than a personal choice "because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance". (Charlotte 30) Hence, they reject motherhood as a goal and deny their biological essentialism.

Finally, Second Wave Feminism embarks on legalizing birth control and abortion. By the end of the fifties, the United States birthrate is overtaking India's. The birth control movement is renamed Planned Parenthood by advising that third or fourth would be born dead or defective. As a result of this, birth control is legalized to some extent. Abortion is not overwhelmingly

welcomed but when extramarital coitus is done by women due to the inefficiency of their male counterpart and their too much engrossment in their carrier lead to several other issues such as family breakdowns (divorce).

Black women in civil rights inspire women's liberation in many ways, and although women's liberationists are committed to fighting racism; nevertheless women's liberation is overwhelmingly white. Critiques of racism from feminists of the colour precipitate creative expansion of feminist thought and feminist agenda. For example, the concept of Womanism is addressed by Alice Walker brings to light the suppression of black women. Sojourner Truth raises her black arm and says, "Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns... aren't I a woman? I could work and eat as much as a man... I have borne thirteen children and most of them sold to slavery" (Friedan). Thus, through the Black Civil Rights Movement as an oppressed race in America, they can imprint a notable landmark in American history.

Moreover, the second wave challenges liberal democratic conceptions. Through the political exploration of relationships and sexuality feminists represent themselves away from the traditional gender roles. Thus, in the second wave, gay liberation and lesbianism are outrageously addressed. In addition to that, Sigmund Freud's theory on Oedipus Complex and woman's anatomical destiny is criticized by Beauvoir, Friedan and many other writers. In conclusion both the waves figure woman as an essential and highly recognized being by shunting away the old, replicated male hegemonic ideas. As a whole, according to Friedan "all the new women and new men" will embrace this new teaching.

Conclusion

Earlier women were characterized and identified as if they playing only one role as a caretaker of the family. However, in our contemporary world women play a “Global Role” by advancing and expediting her charisma into different walks of life. As a result, it is the duty of the society to empower the women with knowledge, skills, attitudes and morals. They are a great asset to the society. Finally, we can understand that today’s empowered women are the tomorrow’s leader. Let’s protect, love and care her.

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