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Feminism: A Revolution within You

Prelude

Women are still marginalized and exploited in many ways around the world and the society should address these issues aggressively. The civil society must be sensitized and motivated to advocate and work for the breaking of glass ceiling for women, within the present social, economic, religious and political structures.

Marginalisation of women over the years has taken firm root within the individual family set ups. The feminists' contribution to the study of families, therefore is of considerable importance. Families are the foundation of society. It is the primary unit of socialisation. Families have the greatest potential for raising healthy individuals and broken families not only affect individual's own lives, but also our communities.

Understanding Feminism

Different types of feminism have emerged over the years, each with a special focus or emphasis on family in a particular society. Despite the numerous differences in their approach and main concern, different feminists tend to agree that women occupy a subordinate position in the family and are exploited in various ways. The link between changes occurring in the family and industrialisation and modernisation is in fact an important theme of research for the social scientists.

Femininity is a set of attributes, behaviours, and roles stereotypically associated with girls and women and therefore often explained by using the terms like womanliness or womanhood. Though socially constructed, femininity is made up of both socially defined and biologically determined factors. 'This makes it distinct from the simple definition of the biological female sex, as women, men, and transgender people can all exhibit feminine traits' (*Gender, Women and Health: What do we mean by "sex" and "gender"?* The World Health Organization).

Traits associated with femininity include a variety of social and cultural factors, and often vary depending on location and context (Witt, edited by Charlotte, 2010, p. 77). Behavioral traits that are considered feminine include gentleness, empathy and sensitivity; accordingly women are expected to become caring, compassionate, and tolerant; nurturance, deference, self-abasement, and succorance are behaviours generally considered feminine.

Femininity is sometimes linked with sexual objectification. Sexual passiveness, or sexual reception, is sometimes considered feminine while sexual assertiveness and sexual desire is sometimes considered masculine. Feminists have challenged the idea that a woman's biological features have made them socially subordinate and have confined them into their homes suitably serving the domestic roles.

Raising their voice against this conservative outlook that 'biology is destiny', the feminists have drawn a sharp distinction between sex and gender. Women's reproductive role and her capacity to feed the baby are associated with sex, whereas gender is to be understood in cultural terms, keeping in view the stereotypical role that the society ascribes to men and women. In this respect, Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* in 1949, pointed out that 'Women are made, they are not born'. Feminists wish to achieve 'personhood', instead of mere biological 'womanhood'.

The main focus of feminism is directed towards women's issues, trying to define, establish, and defend the lawful and genuine claims of the equal political, economic, and social rights and equal

opportunities for women; feminism is, in reality, critical about all sorts of gender inequality and it strives for social, cultural, political and economic equality of both sexes.

In modern connotation, feminism is a collection of women's movements which on the one hand, opposes domestic violence, sexual harassment, advocates for workplace rights including women's equal pay and opportunities for careers and on the other, it seeks to remove unequal and hierarchical power relations between men and women within the family and society. Feminists focus on the political relationship between the sexes, the supremacy of men over women, viewing gender discrimination and subjugation of women as 'political' agenda. Men or women, whoever wishes to fight back against this discrimination and inequality are recognized as feminists. Feminists usually visualize gender as a cultural or socio-political construction, not essentially extracted from biological and irremovable sexual differences; rather gender division is always being the creation of the male thinkers or the outcome of the patriarchal society. Feminists believe that a patriarchy nurtures a hierarchic society, characterised by the dominance of men and subordination of women in society at large.

Feminism raises awareness about the invisibility of women and gives an understanding of the importance of visibility. Feminism can also be defined as the right to make a choice to live a life which is not discriminatory and which works within the principles of social, cultural, political and economic equality and independence.

It is in fact a global struggle for gender equality and making an end of gender based discriminatory practices of the existing patriarchal societies against women. Its goal is gender sensitisation intending to end achieve gender based equality in every society, suited to the socio-cultural set up of a particular society.

Therefore, in true sense it places its claim for the rise of the "essence" of womanhood in the physical, mental, intellectual and the spiritual planes. It calls for the beginning of a campaign for the true rise of

women in all spheres of life for the restoration of the balance in socio-political, economic, as well as biological environment.

Development of feminist perspective

Ancient political philosophers hardly included women's concern in their perception on social, political or ethical issues. In the *Republic*, though Plato (427-347 BC) argued in favour of the training of women for securing their individuality, later in the *Timaeus*, he changed his position denouncing women as the creatures of the most irrational and wicked souls. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) ascribed women as human, but prescribed different type of education for them, because to him women possess distinct set of virtues quite different from those of men. In *Emile* (1762) Rousseau argued that women should be educated for the pleasure of men; he confined their role within the four walls of their respective families, performing the duties of good wives and mothers. Most of the classical liberal theorists defended the exclusive or at least primary property rights of male members of the society. Socialists, however, had somehow acknowledged the role of women wage earners among the working class population.

First wave Feminism

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

First-wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity during the 19th and early twentieth century in the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands and the United States. It focused on *de jure* inequalities, primarily on gaining the right to vote for women. The term *first-wave* was coined retroactively in the 1970s.

- ▶ social justice and human rights
- ▶ rational humanity of women

► civil and economic rights of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) written by an English lady thinker Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) against the backdrop of the French Revolution ([1792]1967) was the landmark for the graceful beginning of the era of women's movement; She took active part in antislavery movement and in the tune of the movement supported the rights of the women.

In her book, Wollstonecraft did not make the claim for gender equality using the same arguments or the same language that late 19th- and 20th century feminists later used. She hardly claimed absolute equality for men and women, rather Wollstonecraft said that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, which means that they are both subject to the same moral law (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 126, 146;). For Wollstonecraft, men and women are equal in the most important areas of life. While such an idea may not seem revolutionary to 21st-century readers, its implications were revolutionary during the 18th century. For example, it implied that both men and women—not just women—should be modest (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 102 and 252) and respect the sanctity of marriage (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 274). Wollstonecraft's argument exposed the sexual double standard of the late 18th century and demanded that men must adhere to the same virtues demanded from women.

In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott in Seneca Falls Convention spoke in favour of women's rights. In 1851, Sojourner Truth addressed women's rights issues through her publication, "Ain't I a Woman"; her concern was limited rights of women. Sojourner Truth raised the issue of the 'intersectionality' debate and Susan B. Anthony raised the issue of the language debate. Lucy Stone, another women suffragist had joined them, followed by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) of England, who formed the first women's suffrage committee in 1865.

This was the first phase of feminist movement that highlighted the demand for equal legal and political rights of women. The definitions of *feminist* may vary, but all will agree that first wave of feminism ended with the achievement of women's suffrage, attained by the women of New Zealand in 1893. US women achieved voting right in 1920 and it was inserted in the Constitution of USA by the nineteenth

Amendment Act. In UK franchise was extended to women in 1918, though they achieved equal voting rights with men in 1928.

The first wave of feminists, in contrast to the second wave, focused very little on the subjects of abortion, birth control, and overall reproductive rights of women. Though she never married, Anthony published her views about marriage, holding that a woman should be allowed to refuse sex with her husband as the American woman had no legal recourse at that time against rape by her husband.

‘Second wave’ Feminism

Betty Friedan (1921 - 2006)

In terms of political agenda feminism is a modern invention, dated back not before 1960s. In the nineteenth century the term ‘feminist’ was used to mean either the feminization of men or the masculinisation of women. In 1920s, such publications as “The Changing Woman”, gave credit to a woman who, in the end, populated the world. But feminism was not more than mere sub-field of liberal or socialist thought till 1960s. Later, the radical feminist thinkers challenged this existing position and proclaimed that central theme of feminism is gender, which was not highlighted by any conventional ideological set up.

In France, Simone de Beauvoir published ‘*The Second Sex*’ in 1949, which was published in USA in 1953. The book attacked both the discriminatory practices and women’s submissive attitude for themselves. Beauvoir had examined the notion of women being perceived as "other" in the patriarchal society. She concluded that women’s biological role is in no way a valid cause or explanation to place them as the "second sex". Beauvoir's book influenced Betty Friedan, who in her 1963 bestselling book *The Feminine Mystique* challenged the stereotype media image of women, placed at home which limited their possibilities, and wasted talent and potential.

Betty Friedan's '*The Feminine Mystique*', stimulated the emergence of 'Second Wave' feminism. She pointed out that the achievement of legal and political rights by the women had not solved women's problems and failed to bring them out from their roles as mere housewives confined within their homes. Friedan(1921 – 2006) focussed on the broadening the educational and career opportunities of women, though she was criticised for highlighting the needs of the middle class women and for neglecting the root cause of women's exploitation, i.e., the patriarchal structure, norms and values prevalent in the society.

Thus the second wave feminism began in 1963. 'Mother of the Movement', Betty Friedan published '*The Feminine Mystique*', and the report of President John F. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women was released; the report was on gender inequality. These events marked the beginning of the second wave feminism. Thus Second Wave Feminism, also acknowledged as The Feminist Movement, or the Women's Liberation Movement, was an era of feminist activity in the United States which began during the early 1960s and lasted through the late 1990s(Sarah Gamble, ed., 2001, p. 25). The exact years of the movement are, however, disputed.

Whereas first-wave feminism focused mainly on overturning legal obstacles to gender equality (i.e. voting rights, property rights), second-wave feminism broadened the debate to a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/647122/womens-movement>). Second Wave Feminism also tried to focus on the issue of solidarity among all women in their experience of oppression by the patriarchal society and its culture. The movement grew with following remarkable legal victories to mention few-

- Equal Pay Act of 1963,
- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and

- The *Griswold v. Connecticut* US Supreme Court ruling of 1965
- In 1966 the National Organization for Women was founded by Friedan and other women and men. After the formation of NOW in 1967 Executive Order extended full Affirmative Action rights to women.

Some other notable achievements were

- Women's Educational Equity Act, 1974, ensuring educational equality for men and women
- the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (1974),
- the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978,
- the Illegalization of Marital Rape (although not illegalized in all states until 1993)
- Legalization of no-fault divorce (although not allowed in all states of USA until 2010),
- A 1975 law requiring the U.S. Military Academies to admit women.

Second wave feminist leaders like Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many other feminists of color considered race related subjectivities. Their focus was on the intersection between race and gender. This focus began to shift with the Freedom Ride 1992; young feminists thus endeavoured to register voters belonging to poor minority communities. The feminist movement now ushered in the era of third-wave feminism with the rally of the young.

Third wave Feminism

Rebecca Walker, (November 17, 1969--)

Third-Wave feminism began in the 1980s and is still continuing. The movement arose as a response to the perceived failures and the achievements of Second-Wave feminism. In the early 1990s, it sought to incorporate 'Equal Rights Amendment' to the US Constitution. The enthusiasm created by second-wave feminism appeared quite timid during the 'third wave feminism'; actually the third wave was less reactive, but had a greater focus on incorporating a greater number of women who till now were almost passive. Third-wave feminism was criticized as merely a continuation of the second wave, though the third wave made its own unique contributions.

"The Third-Wave redefined women and girls as assertive, powerful, and in control of their own sexuality" (Brunell, Laura, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2008) and thus created a sense of empowerment. There was also a realization that women are of many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds; The Third Wave embraced diversity and change. Third-Wave feminism sought to challenge or avoid the second wave's "essentialist" definitions of femininity, which often assumed a universal female identity and over-emphasised the experiences of upper-middle-class white women. In this wave also there had hardly evolved any comprehensive or all-encompassing single feminist idea, but generally the Third Wave believed further changes in stereotypes of women and in the media portrayals of women as well as in the language which were used to define women. The shift from Second Wave feminism came along with many of the legal and institutional rights that were given to women. A more Post-Structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality was central to Third Wave ideology.

Third-Wave theory usually incorporated following common elements:

- Anti-racism
- Womanism
- Eco feminism

- Rejection of the gender binary
- Rejection of the 'sisterhood' project of Second Wave Feminism
- Ending gender violence; organisations such as V-Day were formed, for that purpose, as well as the artistic expression of the Vagina Monologues, to bring awareness and action.
- Transformation of the stereotype and exploration of women's feelings about sexuality
- Sex-positivity

Along with these central issues, third wave feminists also gave attention towards some workplace rights and securities such as the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, unfair maternity leave policies; they sought to extend support for single mothers by means of welfare and child care and respect for working mothers and mothers who decided to opt to devote full time for child care and thus left their careers.

Third- wave, accordingly offered women centered political theory, rather than modifying the traditional masculine theories. Third-wave subscribed to queer theory, post-colonial theory, postmodernism, transnationalism, libertarian feminism, and transgender politics. Third-wave feminists such as Elle Green often focus on "micro-politics".

The Third Wave feminists started utilising the internet and modern technology to enhance their movement, which allowed for information and organization to reach a larger audience. The Internet radically democratised the content of the feminist movement with respect to participants, aesthetics, and issues.

Some third-wave feminists preferred not to call themselves feminists, as the word '*feminist*' could be misinterpreted as insensitive to the fluid notion of gender and the potential oppressions inherent in all

gender roles. Third-wave feminism dealt with issues that seem to limit or oppress women, as well as other marginalized identities.

One issue raised by critics was the lack of a single cause for third-wave feminism. The first wave fought for and gained the right for women to vote. The second wave struggled to obtain the right for women to have access and equal opportunity to the workforce, as well as ending of legal sex discrimination and oppression. The third wave of feminism, some argued, lacked a cohesive goal, and it was often seen as an extension of the second wave. Also, third-wave feminism did not have a set definition that could distinguish itself from second-wave feminism.

Feminist scholars such as Shira Tarrant object to the "wave construct" because it ignores important progress between the so-called waves. Furthermore, if feminism is a global movement, the fact that the 'first-, second-, and third waves' time periods correspond most closely to American feminist developments or at least to the developments in the western world raises genuine questions about how feminism will recognise the history of political issues around the world. If feminism is not understood in global term, it will fail to highlight the problems of the women of different nationalities, classes, races and ethnicities, who are struggling in their own ways to obtain gender justice, to get equal rights and status and to make an end of oppression.

However, the chronological or generational study of feminism is essential for a comprehensive account of gradual development of the feminist movement, as well as for focusing on the indication that the movement has not yet reached its peak. The chronological or generational model gives an idea about the course of transformation of the movement for women's civil and political rights into feminist movement.

Feminism in India

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as Sati.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati; the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and independent women's organizations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women in the work force and right to political parity.

Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. Indian women are still denied the right to own property and access to education in many parts of the country due to India's strong patriarchal culture. In the past few decades, there has also emerged an alarming trend of sex-selective abortion. Unnatural death of female fetus death of girl children has led to the steady decline of male – female ratio, which according to census 2011 is 1000:943.

As in the West, there has been some criticism of feminist movements in India. They have especially been criticized for focusing too much on women already privileged, and neglecting the needs and representation of poorer or lower caste women. This has led to the creation of caste-specific feminist organizations and movements.

In India, women's issues first began to be addressed when the state commissioned a report on the status of women to a group of feminist researchers and activists. The report recognised the fact that in India, women were oppressed under a system of structural hierarchies and injustices. During this period, Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates being conducted about violence against women. However, due to the difference in the historical and social culture of India, the debate in favour of Indian women had to be conducted creatively and certain Western ideas had to be rejected. Women's issues began to gain an international prominence when the decade of 1975-1985 was declared the United Nations Decade for Women.

Notable Indian feminists

- Lalithambika Antharjanam – author and social reformer whose work reflected women's roles in society.
- Barnita Bagchi – scholar and sociologist with a focus on women's education.
- Jasodhara Bagchi – founder of the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University
- Sarala Devi Chaudhurani – early feminist and founder of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, one of the first women's organizations in India.
- Saroj Nalini Dutt – early social reformer who pioneered the formation of educational Women's Institutes in Bengal
- Mira Datta Gupta – activist for women's issues and one of the founding members of the All India Women's Conference

Achievements of Feminist Movements

Feminism is an impulse that has made a change in gender perspective necessary so much for social change. The movement shook the dominant ideas and values of the patriarchal societies prevalent in

various parts of the world. Women won protection from employment discrimination, gender equality, greater representation in media, equal access to school and higher education, equal rights etc. in many of the developed and developing world. The feminist movement continues to support and encourage women to pursue their goals as individuals who deserve equal opportunity. Women are now entering the organised labor force in large numbers; new gender friendly public policies have emerged.

Demographic changes, decline in birth rate, increased life expectancy, and such other achievements of industrial and technologically improved societies have also changed the popular understanding of marriage and the very meaning of life, adding substances to the demands of women, opposed to the patriarchal strands in the dominant culture. The movements in general have sought to challenge the political structure, power holders, and cultural beliefs or practices of patriarchal societies.

Feminist movement should show a new path of creative, generative and constructive freedom. The new wave of the feminist movement should transcend the gender and should focus on creating new structures in the society whether it is in the social, economic, religious or political spheres of life. This can be achieved based on the practice of balance between the feminine and masculine principles or values. Such innovative and revolutionary structures would ensure the creation of a new order, a new way of thinking directed towards movement of humanity in a holistic manner.

Concluding Overview

Feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of discrimination in all forms. However, there are many different phases of development of feminism.

"First-wave feminism" arguably began in the late 18th century with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and ended with the ratification of the Twentieth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protected a woman's right to vote. First-wave

feminism was concerned primarily with establishing, as a point of policy, that women are human beings and should not be treated like property.

The second wave of feminism emerged in the wake of World War II, during which many women entered the workforce, and would have arguably ended with the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), had it been ratified. The central focus of the second wave was on total gender equality--women as a group having the same social, political, legal, and economic rights that men have.

Both first-wave and second-wave feminism are criticised for representing movements for the rights of white women. First- and second-wave feminism also tended to emphasize the rights and opportunities of middle-class women over poor and working-class women. First- and second-wave feminism, as movements, were largely confined to industrialized nations. But third-wave feminism takes a global perspective--not by merely attempting to colonize developing nations with Western practices, but by empowering women to actualize change, to gain power and equality, within their own cultures and their own communities and with their own voices.

Later on more general values were identified, shared, and transformed, and the three waves of feminist movements as a whole, have worked to include a broader spectrum of people. For example, the movement later included women of different classes, races and sexual orientations. Even in the 1970s, NOW (National Organization of Women) had acknowledged the oppression of lesbians as a legitimate concern of feminism. By increasing awareness about women's issues individuals were motivated to educate themselves through experience or academics and to use gender-neutral language.

Further, the critiques pointed out that the chronological study of the feminist movements appear to be class and race based concentrating mainly on the problems and demands raised in the context of American society and politics, at the best that of Western Europe. Progress of feminism was also measured in terms of a particular idea of gender justice, while women around the globe and women of all nationalities, social classes, races and ethnicities are engaged in the struggles for gender justice.

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"Remember no one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

—Eleanor Roosevelt