



Research Paper

Evolution of Feminism Effects & Challenges

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Abstract

Feminist theory has developed over a period of time, wherein it was not just a theory advocating for the equality of the female sex but also the equality of humans, irrespective of the sex, race, caste, sex, etc. The development of this theory took place through various movements in the European as well as the American Society. This paper seeks to study how feminism has evolved over the past centuries, understand the wave metaphor, and its drawbacks along with emphasis on the development of the feminist theory. This paper also sheds some light on feminism in the context of the Indian society and how Indian scholars have interpreted and positioned themselves on the concept of Feminism – the ideology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

*Social reforms are never carried out by the weakness of the strong; but always by the strength of the weak
~ Karl Marx*

Intrinsic to any society is reform which brings about change in the current practices, beliefs and ideologies in the society. Reform happens when injustice/discomfort go to such an extent that it becomes impossible for the human to survive in those prevailing conditions and hence, people form interest groups and start asking for more than what they had been given by the world. One such invaluable reform that has taken the shape of an ideology over the course of time is *Feminism*.

Men and Women are two of nature's marvelous creations which are not only major players in the balancing of food chain, but also make up the world that we have today. While both the sexes were a creation of nature for specific purposes and both equally important for the continuation of life, human civilizational thought and activity progressed in such a way that subjugation of women (the female sex), who were realized as beings of lesser strength both emotional and physical became a culture. The idea of domestication of women soon emerged and this sort of categorization led to the popular belief that women were meant to stay in the domestic sphere and cannot do those works which was outside their domain, that is, outside of domestic work. This led to denial of education of women, and as democracies emerged, women were not given the right to vote. Many beliefs and consequential subjugation built up to a point where women could not tolerate the sub-human treatment anymore and started to speak up. Feminism and feminist movements in the west were the fight against these injustices and their struggle to attainment of their rights.

Although the struggle cannot be assigned a clear timeline, the emergence and development of several movements can be traced as to when 'feminism' developed in the real sense and when it gained popularity. This paper seeks to give readers an insight into the definition of feminism, the theories surrounding it, the historical evolution of the idea, an insight into how the world today understands feminism and also debunk certain myths surrounding how feminism is explained in academic circles along with a brief note on feminism in India.

DEFINING FEMINISM

The term Feminism and the idea behind it have taken several turns over the course of history and have gone to represent different aspirations, meanings, and core values.

The term 'feminism' is known to have originated from the term *feminisme* which was coined, as claimed by various historical writings, by Charles Fourier¹ who was a utopian socialist and word was first used

¹ New World Encyclopedia, "Feminism", [accessed on: 1/02/2022]

by a women's suffrage advocate Hubertine Auclert who is also known as the first self-proclaimed feminist of France.

By 1900s, feminism had become one of the many 'ism' words that started appearing in the more politically organised society – conservatism, liberalism, socialism, etc. A veritable taxonomy of self-described feminisms had also started to be seen on the lines of – familial feminists, integral feminists, Christian feminists, socialist feminists, radical feminists, male feminists, among others. There also started a culture where believers of one type of feminism started categorising the other feminist believers into 'bad feminists' and 'good feminists'. For Example, Socialist feminists casted their aspersions on bourgeois feminists and radical feminists were seen as the trouble making feminists. These sort of distinctions started to bring in ambiguity and questioning as to who could actually be called feminists and who couldn't.

During the 1970s, English Dictionaries in Europe and America² carried a definition of feminism which stated: "a theory and/or movement concerned with advancing the position of women through such means as achievement of political, legal, or economic rights equal to those granted men"³ This definition majorly suggests the prevalent norm in those times wherein the definition has emphasized the granting of rights to women equal to those granted to men which indicates how male rights were the norm and hence, the definition somehow reflected an aspiration of elevation of a woman to the status of a human, which inherently was not given to them. The same definitions' aspirations were carried forward to the first ever women's rights convention – the famous Seneca Falls convention.⁴

ROOTS OF FEMINISM

It would be wrong of any writer to deny the existence of feminism prior to its formalisation as an organised movement as women were always thinkers, and so, the idea of women having intellectual capacities and hence deserving of rights as possessed by man date way back to ancient Greece with Saphon (d. c. 570 BC), Hildegard and Bingen (d. 1179) of the medieval world or Christine de Pisan (d. 1434). Olympe de Gouge (d. 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1797) and Jane Austen (d. 1817) are considered as foremothers of the women's rights movement. All of them had advocated for intelligence, dignity, and basic human potential of the female sex.⁵

While the above thinkers were majorly known for their thoughts and some of them for their expression of womanhood through their writings, the formulation of a woman's movement into a formal structured movement only happened in the later part of the nineteenth century.

The backdrop of the period of abolitionism in the early 1830s is helpful in locating the roots of development of feminism as an organised force.⁶ Abolitionism period is characterized by a series of anti-slavery protests and conventions and development of the idea of human rights of slaves, etc. One essential feature as well as a drawback of the anti-slavery revolutions was that it completely ignored women's rights. Although women were allowed to attend meetings of the Liberty Party⁷, they were not allowed to speak.⁸ This not only put black women in a doubly disadvantaged position, but also raised a main question among women as to the difference of treatment between them and the negroes⁹. Subsequently, these characteristics of the Abolitionist movement led to the feminist movement in the America.

² United States of America has been cut short to America for better comprehension.

³ Karren Offen, *Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach*, Signs, Autumn, Vol. 14 No. 1 (Autumn 1988), p. 123

⁴ Karren Offen, *Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach*, Signs, Autumn, Vol. 14 No. 1 (Autumn 1988), p. 123

⁵ Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism", Pacific University Oregon, [accessed on: 1/02/2022]

⁶ *The Roots of Individualist Feminism in 19th-Century America* (Excerpted from *Freedom, Feminism, and the State*, published by The Independent Institute, 100 Swan Way, Oakland, California, 94621-1428.)

⁷ Liberty Party was a leading force in the abolitionist movement.

⁸ Harrold & Stanley, "Abolitionist Politics", *Reviews in American History*, 39(1), p. 98

⁹ The term is used in reference to its usage in the 19th century and is currently abolished.

THE WAVE METAPHOR

The wave metaphor is the most popular way in which historical evolution of the feminist movement is presented. The wave metaphor of feminism divides feminism into three waves based on majorly two characteristics – (1) time period of occurrence (2) goals and aspirations behind the movements. One difference that anyone looking to study feminism's evolution should firstly, understand the difference between the feminist movement and feminist theory, and secondly, understand the significance that the movements played in the development of various feminist theories.

To address the first distinction, Feminist movement and Feminist Theory are two different phrases having two different connotations. Feminist movement refers to the organised movements which include protests, conventions such as Seneca falls, etc., and other forms of activism towards the recognition of women and these are the movements categorised into waves and explained from the activism standpoint. Feminist Theory is mainly characterized by the ideas that emerged throughout the course of the movements of the waves. For instance, the development of a language of equal rights for women is an achievement of the first wave of feminism¹⁰. Various other ideas developed throughout the three waves of feminism which will be explained below but the ideas that developed throughout the course of the waves of feminism are collectively compiled as the Feminist Theory. Feminist theory later expanded into an ideology which was then inculcated into various disciplines like social science, Anthropology, etc., aimed at studying the impact of any theory from the gender standpoint.¹¹

FIRST WAVE

The first wave feminism includes the feminist movements that took place starting from the later part of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. This period focussed on attaining some of the most basic rights of women and bringing them from the status of sub-humans to the level of human beings. To put in technical terms, the wave focussed on the equal rights to property, contract, and opposed the concept of ownership of women after marriage by husbands. The movement emerged out of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics.¹² The formal movement was marked by the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 wherein three hundred men and women rallied for the cause of equality for women. The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919), guaranteeing women the right to vote, is recognized the closure of first-wave feminism in the United States.

SECOND WAVE

The second wave feminism is known to have started in the 1960s and lasted until the 1980s. The most prominent feature of the second wave is that minority struggles and rights started gaining more popularity and inclusion into the movement. The first wave was predominantly led by white women, though the movements were assumed to encompass all women. It was only later that the realisation of the fact that the nature of patriarchy faced by white woman and black women had stark distinctions. Hence, the second wave of feminism is said to be more inclusive of minority equality and on a broader sense, the second wave feminism focussed on overall equality in the society rather than only women.¹³

The beginning of the phase was marked by the protests against the Miss Americana Pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969. The fight against the degradation of women who claimed their objectification and called makeup and other “girly” standards set by the society as oppression by the society.

Another important theoretical ideas developed during the second wave of feminism was the differentiation between the biological and social construction of ‘women’. The wave sought to debunk the relationship between biology and the role of women as mothers and caregivers and this initiated many studies into gender studies.¹⁴

The 1960s is also the period when the Marxist-feminist thought emerged in terms of Feminist Theory which sought to study the effects of capitalism on women of a capitalistic society.¹⁵

¹⁰ Stanford Encyclopedia, “Feminist Political Philosophy”, pub: 01/03/2009, [accessed on: 02/02/2022]

¹¹ Mihai Androne, “A Terminological Analysis of Feminist Ideology”, *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences* 63 (2012) 170 – 176

¹² Martha Rampton, “Four Waves of Feminism”, Pacific University Oregon, [accessed on: 02/02/2022]

¹³ McAfee, Noëlle and Katie B. Howard, "Feminist Political Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

¹⁴ Mikkola, Mari, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

¹⁵ Martha Gimenez & Lise Vogel, “Marxist-Feminist Thought Today”, Vol 69, Issue 1, Jan 2005, pp. 5-10

THIRD WAVE

The third wave feminism is a wave that not only celebrates the tears of the activists and supporters in the first wave but also enjoys the extent of female legal rights more than ever and is characterised by the furtherance of feminist theory as well as adaptation of women rights to the newly globalized and technologically advanced world.

Third wave is known to have begun in the mid-90s, and was set in a post-colonial and post-modern society. This wave is known to have included the notions of “universal womanhood”, with emphasis on body, sexuality, gender, and heteronormativity in general. The third wave continues in our society with the fight against patriarchal roots that are still visible with many countries still having laws that restrict women from having full autonomy and control of their lives and bodies. Democracy has steered the betterment of women with various government policies focussed around women empowerment and upliftment across all classes of the society.

DRAWBACKS OF THE WAVE METAPHOR

Through the above description of feminism, a clear picture of the wave metaphor and how it explained the evolution of feminism has been made clear. However, scholars have often debated upon the validity and accuracy of the wave metaphor in depiction of feminism. In a study conducted by a feminist researcher, Jo Reger¹⁶ who conducted interviews among students studying feminism and those who are feminist activists to analyse the discursive legacy of the wave metaphor, the author through her research and interviews tried to show how the wave metaphor may be inadequate in explaining the trajectory of feminism in real terms and there should be brought about a change in how feminist theory and history is taught to the students in the education related to women such as feminist studies.

Various other scholars too, over the years have debated over the validity and accuracy of the wave metaphor. The main argument presented by almost all scholars who question the wave metaphor is that the waves did not represent and narrate the stories of diverse communities that were involved in the struggle. Earlier it was mentioned that the first wave was characterized by whiteness but scholars often argue that feminist movements were far more complex than that expressed by the wave metaphor and such complexity cannot be expressed in terms of three simple waves. Homogeneity in the description of waves is one of the drawbacks of the wave metaphor.

Another aspect Reger presents through her study is the inaccuracy of the linear expression of feminism through waves. It is a fact that any social movements possibly cannot take a linear trajectory in development and are always represented by a haphazard graph.¹⁷ This poses problem in how the Wave Metaphor represents feminism as a linear social movement which progressed from one time period to another, with the subsequent waves picking up from where the previous wave left off. This however, is not true. Studies and researchers as well as the interviews conducted by Reger have clearly indicated that many issues that the second wave feminists faced were faced by the third wave feminists too and those elements still existed in the society while the next wave fought those along with tackling new issues. Therefore, linearity of Wave Metaphor poses problems to the development of feminism as an academic subject.

Reger however, through her interviews, points out as to how the wave metaphor still remains as a discursive legacy as feminists of the twenty first century continue to use it to locate themselves in the trajectory of feminism and find their identity as feminists.

FEMINISM IN INDIA

A prerequisite to understanding the meaning and importance of ‘feminism’ in the Indian context is to understand how Indian history, its cultural denominations etc., have been shaped over the years and also how India, as a country is located in the geopolitical system of the world. India was colonized by the British and most of Indian political developments, for many centuries, centered around their fight, defiance and attempt to weed the colonizers out of their mother land. Another feature surrounding this is that as the British ruled India, most of Indian society was influenced, carved and molded along the western lines. This brought in great complexity and confusion in later stages of Indian development that had to co-exist with western ideals instilled in their society along with the continuation of Indian values, traditions, cultures, etc. The state of confusion still

¹⁶ Jo Reger, “Finding a Place in History: The Discursive Legacy of the Wave Metaphor and Contemporary Feminism”, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2017), pp. 193-221

¹⁷ Rocha Menocal, A, “Social movements”, GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack no. 50. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, (2016).

continues in the country where 'modernism', as adapted from the West is often seen as negative western influence by some while others see it as the ultimate way to growth and globalization of the Indian Economy.

The above-mentioned context is important in consonance with the concept of feminism as perceived in India because 'feminism', as a formalized movement/ideology has its origins in the western¹⁸ countries, particularly the United States with reference to the movements discussed earlier. This feature in the definition of feminism has a great deal of influence on feminism in India. Essentially, through colonization, India had to adopt most of the popular ideologies from the west, not due to the lack of ideas in the country but due to the over influence and developments during the colonial era. Due to these factors, explaining 'feminism' in India is a rather complex task because of how different Indian demographics is, and also the homogenic nature of the term 'feminism'. Leaders and groups in India who fought and advocated for women's rights often chose to separate themselves from being called feminists and cited many reasons for it. For instance, Madhu Kishwar in *Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist*¹⁹ writes about the made-up perceptions about feminism and what it should be by the west which might not confer with the struggles of the Indian women and patriarchy.

Another aspect highlighted by Kishwar is the use of labels like socialist feminist, radical feminist, etc. which essentially try to create a good-bad perception to feminism which is also another reason why 'feminism' is seen as a rather convoluted term to be used by Indian activists whose aspirations might not even resonate with the western meaning of the term. If the above argument that 'feminism' is a rather inappropriate term to use in the Indian context is understood, the next thing to understand pertaining to the Indian context is that the kind of patriarchy that exists in India, is also different from that of the West. While some things, undoubtedly resonate pervasively - in the Indian context, scholars have used the term 'multiple patriarchies' to explain as to why there is a need for change in forming the narrative around women's movement. The fact that discrimination existed in different forms across caste, class, cultures which makes the western definition of feminism redundant and hence would make its adoption complex.²⁰

The question now arises – then what would those activists be labelled who fought for women's right to education and other such rights? The answer to this lies not in feminism but in the term 'social reformers'. Before the social reformer argument is made, the researcher would like to clarify and suggest that giving labels to activism can sometimes get redundant and cause further disruption than reform as explained above with the example of feminist labels and their meanings. Therefore, categorizing activism into labels might prove to be counter-productive. Coming to social reformers, the mere fact that the activist ideologies of people such as Savitri Bai Phule, Tarabai Shinde and even Raja Rammohan Roy cannot completely be fit into the definition of feminism. Therefore, rethinking of portrayal of feminism should be done in India, while giving due importance to the historical sufferings of women across different classes, castes, and cultures.

II. CONCLUSION

Through the research on Feminism, one thing that we can clearly see is that it has been a long-fought struggle fought by the previous generations who saw a good cause, and decided to speak up against oppression. Even in contemporary times, history of feminism provides a good example of how fight against oppression, fight for attainment of human rights, fight for the larger good is worth fighting. Although there may be certain inherent flaws in some movements as explained above, the fact that humankind strove towards correcting those flaws give the contemporary world the hope that the issues of today will take a course of their own and there will be a better world tomorrow.

We've also seen how diversity unifies on certain basic aspects and fights for a common cause.

The political development of feminism was not only led by women but was also supported by countless men who saw the truth behind the veil established by the society on the women. The political philosophy goes on to show that there is only one way forward and that is through equality of all races, genders, sexes, castes, etc. and by giving utmost importance to human rights, and this is the essence of feminism as seen today.

On a final note, feminism may only be a series of movements that brought about revolution to others but for all the women reading this paper, and to the one written, it is an emotion. To know that past struggles have borne fruit in today's world is the greatest gift to any woman studying, walking down the street by herself, and even going to the space in a larger context.

¹⁸ The word 'western' is used to denote the ideologies of west as seen by the Indian scholars. While the researcher notes the subjectiveness of the term, it has been used to denote the ideological meaning of 'western' which is most used in the Indian political circles to refer to ideas pertaining to countries such as the USA, the UK, Europe, etc.

¹⁹ Madhu Kishwar, "*Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist*", *Collected Works, Vol LXXI, p.323*.

²⁰ Mary E. John, "*FEMINISM IN INDIA AND THE WEST- Recasting a Relationship*", Centre for Women's Development Studies New Delhi, 2015, p. 207