

1. Who I Am – Feminism Revisited: An Overview

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Abstract:

Feminism is for women, what the Elizabethan age was for England, “...rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.” (Milton) Although the struggle, significance and sophistication associated with the term is not of one age but of ages. Over the years women fought for what may be called the “renaissance” or rebirth of the new woman; who could be socially, politically, legally and economically independent. But all this was slow to come. The general outcry took the form of a powerful and magnanimous movement, which literally altered the face of patriarchal society. The present paper endeavours to investigate the origin and development of this movement; and also to pay a tribute to the inextinguishable and daredevil spirit of innumerable women who tirelessly contributed in making the “new woman” a reality. While doing research, one has to be duly conscious of all the facets and tenets governing the issue. To enumerate and illuminate upon a few aspects and leave alone the rest would be doing great injustice to the subject matter altogether, for each detail is imminent and inextricably linked to the foundation and formation of the aforesaid issue, in the absence of which the related discussion loses its strength and vitality. The current paper resolves to discreetly approach this problem. The chief purpose of this work is to voice the voiceless, to empower the muted and to lend vision to those who are shortsighted to the estimate of a woman and her worth.

Keywords: feminism, invincible, significance, rebirth, new woman, development, tribute, daredevil.

Full Text:

In the Attic comedy 'Lysistrata' by Aristophanes, the women of Athens go on a strike to stop men from fighting wars. In a few days time, the men submit after accepting defeat. One wonders if that is the first instance of feminism in literature. On a serious note, women have always been identified with broomsticks, rolling pins, serving spoons and sitting rooms; almost like "empty pitchers". Even the Bible defined the woman as a "help meet" and an obedient companion of man. It became unthinkable for man to see her beyond domesticity and humble servility. Soon she began to be scorned, ridiculed even brutalized for her meekness, timidity, dependence and fragility (Margaret Atwood skilfully presents a radical dystopian vision of feminism toppled in A Handmaid's Tale). It is here that the so-called "feminists" came to the rescue. They argued that here was a problem and that needed to be dealt with effectively. The preceding paper presents a concise historical background of the condition of women over the ages and an objective delineation of certain distinguished women who succeeded to leave an imprint on not only Feminist literature but also global humanity.

Summer is fading:

The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.
In the hollows of afternoons
Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Behind them, at intervals,
Stand husbands in skilled trades,
An estateful of washing,
And the albums, lettered
Our wedding, lying
Near the television:
Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

They are still courting-places
(But the lovers are all in school),

And their children, so intent on
Finding unripe acorns,
Expect to be taken home.

Their beauty has thickened.
Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.

(Philip Larkin)

If one is to record the predicament of women in as early as 16th century, he is barely amazed to find that women never enjoyed what is called “freedom” of their own. Their roles were limited to good housekeeping, child bearing and child rearing. On the contrary, unmarried, bold and outspoken women were easy praise for witch-hunts. Anne Askew was tried for heresy and executed. Anne Hutchinson was burnt at the stake (see Amy Hudock, 2005). But on a general level, women were uneducated and never dared to differ with their husbands, leave alone the society; they were subjected to the daily grind that often comes with domesticity and fared worse in the hands of an abusive husband. Only the queen (Elizabeth I, 1558-1603) enjoyed exceptional privileges and prerogatives. She led most of the men of her time by their noses and would not take “no” for an answer. She was well educated, clever, had perfect oratory skills and was highly opinionated so much so that anyone who dared to challenge her supremacy ran the risk of execution. Nevertheless, several important developments took place during her reign. This was especially so after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1586.

In the 17th century, nothing very potent happened to change the position of women though they now began to voice their opinions in the domestic sphere and acted as wise “counsellors” to their husbands. Their roles within the domestic circle and local community began to indirectly influence the political system. Women speaking openly on political and state affairs were still considered “vulgar”. Education was offered only to the point of fulfilling her moral obligations, as a daughter and a wife. As a consequence, women of this age did a lot of things. They wrote diaries, logbooks, letters and private journals speaking their minds on religious issues and day-to-day affairs. There are evidences of women who were active members of a number of social and religious guilds, the accounts of which read “brethren and sistern” and “freemen and freewomen”.

The 18th century, with the rise of the middle class and the expansion of consumerism saw a steep rise in the appearance of women in social, domestic as well as economic spheres.

Women belonging to the lower and upper middle class came forward to assist their husbands in their work. The gentry however, scorned at the idea of women working outside their homes. Men still looked down upon the education of women and began to perceive it as a growing threat to their monopoly. "Men were conscious of this educational disparity between the sexes, but often defended it as essential for the maintenance of wives in proper subjection." (See Amaury De Reincourt, 1989). With the advent of the periodicals and the rise of education among women of the lower classes as a result of the "cultural revolution"; publishing business peaked with both men and women contributing to what Matthew Arnold called, "the age of prose and reason" (though women's writing were mostly concerned with domesticity and practical day-to-day affairs). With the spontaneous growth and spread of colonialism another important change was marked. Women who travelled abroad wrote accounts of them in letters and books describing the new and strange world they had come in. Then appeared powerful visionaries like Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Eliza Heywood and Mrs. Anne Radcliffe who pleaded for feminine rights and equal opportunities. Throughout the world, women were emerging, demanding recognition and respect. In Russia, Catherine The Great proved her imminence and mettle by laying a "coup d'etat" against her male adversaries. Thereby, she saved her son from disinheritance and herself secured the position of the queen. She enacted laws, which deeply influenced the Russian political system. In France, Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland were excommunicated for demanding equal rights for women. Phillis Wheatley, an African-American slave who expressed her opinion on slavery and British imperialism through her poetry, became a popular figure among American abolitionists. Even the English writer, Jane Austen expressed deep annoyance and discontent over the customs and conventions of the time, which were strictly biased and in favour of men, especially with regard to marriage and property rights. Altogether, women of this age began to refute and retort against the injustices they faced.

In the 19th century, this movement took a gigantic leap forward as a sisterhood of distinguished female writers emerged, who wrote covertly and under pen names. The Bronte Sisters and George Eliot became household favourites. More importantly, women of this age wrote on a variety of subjects. From here on, female activists and advocates of feminism began to voice their grudges and for the first time, they came to be heard. Eminent scholars and critics such as John Stuart Mill came forward and powerfully argued in favour of women. In his own words:

“What citizen of a free country would listen to any offers of good and skilful administration, in return for the abdication of freedom? Even if he could believe that good and skilful administration can exist among a people ruled by a will not their own, would not the consciousness of working out their own destiny under their own moral responsibility be a compensation to his feelings for great rudeness and imperfection in the details of public affairs? Let him rest assured that whatever he feels on this point, women feel in a fully equal degree.”

But it was in the 20th century that this movement gained a momentum with such phenomenal writers as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Woolf in a series of lectures delivered in a college, which was later compiled into a book called *A Room Of One's Own* managed to deliver the first serious and systematic doctrine on feminism and herself came to be identified as a “feminist”. In her doctrine, she argues two things. First, equal educational opportunities for a woman's literary self-expression and second, “a room of one's own” where she can freely discharge her own work without being intruded every now and then. She also says that an impoverished mind can never breed genius. Therefore, a woman needs to be well fed. Her fictional analysis on Judith Shakespeare, William Shakespeare's sister is a real nugget. That any woman who contemplated or even fancied a future in artistic pursuits would be unscrupulously “compromised” and exploited is a fair assessment of the plight of the woman of that age.

Another work, which vehemently shook the foundations of human comprehension, was the French critic Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Bauer rightfully observes that Beauvoir escapes the “essentialist/antiessentialist” mayhem by the question-“What is a woman?” followed by “I am”; which is to say, “I am a woman: Therefrom I think.” (See Nancy Bauer, 2001) Beauvoir further claims that a woman is not born a woman, but she is made one. The fact is that the world has been male dominated over the centuries and women have been host to play second fiddle. This condition, Beauvoir believes to have been wrought by the women themselves. Though it was the men who led them to believe, what they thought to be righteous; women never challenged the verity of these grand notions. Ideology supported by religious injunction prevented women to grow to their full stature. Most women were caged in their houses like canaries singing to the tunes of their family and society. Men tried to cover up their guilt under the pretext that everything was done to keep the woman happy and adhered to the notion of “an angel in the house”. Ironically, the woman was happy to live under such conditions. To this qualified nonsense Beauvoir posits

a simple analogy. If a small boy is made to do nothing and is kept amused all day without being prodded to study or illuminated upon the usefulness of education; apparently, when he grows up it will be said that he chose to remain ignorant and incapable. Beauvoir's startling discoveries and candid communication is what makes the book a grand feast to dig on.

Post-Colonial theorist and critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak shows how imperialism and male domination parallels with each other in tuning women into "subalterns". That woman belonged to the same group as that of the aboriginals, Negroes, outcastes and other deprived people. In her own words:

"The question is not of female participation in insurgency or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow..." (see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988)

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* affirms through a series of examples, how literary works composed by some male authors were thoroughly sexist, manipulative and exploitative of women's physical attributes.

Germaine Greer examines the equation betwixt rationality and irrationality in context of feminism. She says:

"Status ought not to be measured for women in terms of attracting and snaring a man. The woman who realizes that she is bound by a million Lilliputian threads in an attitude of impotence and hatred masquerading as tranquillity and love has no option but to run away, if she is not to be corrupted and extinguished utterly." (here she is referring to the relationship between Helmer and Nora and specifically alluding to the likes of her). However, she warns:

"...the woman who accepts a way of life which she has not knowingly chosen, acting out a series of contingencies falsely presented as destiny, is truly irresponsible. To abdicate one's own moral understanding, to tolerate crimes against humanity, to leave everything to

someone else, the father-ruler-king-computer, is only irresponsibility. To deny that a mistake has been made when its results are chaos visible and tangible on all sides, that is irresponsibility.”(see Germaine Greer,2006)

On the other hand feminists such as Audre Lorde contends, “Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our heart knows “that is not me”. In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within the society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practising. By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.” Even Bell Hooks affirms,” No other group in America had so their identity socialized out of existence as have black women....When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men, and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women.” (see Bell Hooks, 1999)These feminists emphasized upon the incorporation of race-related subjectivities and other dynamisms in the study of feminism. In the coming years, this movement has variably forked out in a number of directions.

Conclusion:

Whatever be the correct assessment, it should be remembered that feminism as a whole, focuses on a broader and comprehensive attainment of objective, which is to ensure the protection and preservation of the dignity and sanity of each and every woman, regardless of her caste, colour, race, creed, sexual preference (see Audre Lorde, 2005) or any such discrimination. To this end, some post-feminists contend that the goal has already been achieved and nothing else remains to be accomplished. This view is highly erroneous, i.e., to rest complacent with the rehash of what has already been done. A lot still needs to be done in terms of female awareness, emancipation, participation and recognition. To quote Greer again:

“The joy of struggle is not hedonism and hilarity, but the sense of purpose, achievement and dignity which is the reflowering of etiolated energy.”

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