

A Close Study of Feminist Theory and The Evolution of Feminism

Bhavya Soni, Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan

Abstract:

The term "feminism" refers to a broad spectrum of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that have the shared objective of defining, establishing, and achieving the equality of the sexes in political, economic, personal, and social spheres. The fundamental tenet of feminism is to seek women's equality and justice in all spheres of life and to create possibilities for women to have the same access to resources that are otherwise freely accessible to men. Since feminism covers such a wide range of topics, including the history of women's oppression as well as potential solutions to the problem of women's "anxiety of authorship" by creating a literary canon that is uniquely theirs, it is clear that feminism is an expansive field of study. Nonetheless, the purpose of this paper is to outline some fundamental ideas and assumptions of feminism and to trace the theoretical foundation of the movement by examining a few pioneering works in feminist literary theory. However, a great number of feminists look out the many windows in an attempt to find answers to the challenges that face society.

Keywords: Feminism, feminist theory, three waves of feminism, and historical development

Introduction:

The term "feminism" comes from the Latin word "femina," which means "woman," and was originally used in reference to the issues of equality and the women's rights movement. Feminism is derived from the word "woman." Feminism explores the cultural dimensions of the woman's material life. Toril Moi says "The words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new Woman's Movement which emerged in the late 1960s." Feminist literary-cultural critics assume that cultural texts such as cinema, TV soap operas, music, and painting parallel and duplicate real-life power struggles between genders. Cultural texts naturalize the oppression of women through their stereotypical representation of women as weak/vulnerable, seductress, obstacles, sexual objects, or procreating devices. The task of criticism, therefore, is to reveal the underlying ideologies within these texts because these ideologies are instrumental in continuing women's oppression. Therefore, numerous forms of definitions are possible for the ideology of feminists. Each definition of feminism is based on the values and key ideas of the ideologies, history, culture, and beliefs.

Liberal feminism: Liberal feminism aims to achieve gender equality in various aspects of life, such as the workplace, society, and the law, by utilizing individual skills and the democratic process. To achieve this goal, liberal feminists strive to unite women into larger groups that can speak with greater authority and leverage available resources and techniques to promote change. They often lobby lawmakers, raise public awareness, and seek to unite women for a common cause. In contrast, socialist or Marxist feminists believe that the democratic process needs reform.

For instance, if a coworker regularly makes offensive comments to you or your colleagues, you may want to take action.

This could involve talking to your boss, filing a complaint with the company's human resources department, seeking legal advice, or bringing your grievances to the public's attention if the company doesn't comply with harassment laws. If you had been employed before the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, you might have looked for others in your community who had gone through the same thing or cast your vote for someone who supported legislation to outlaw sexual harassment. You might also have continued to work for the same employer in the hopes of becoming promoted and gaining the power to alter the corporate culture over time. The activities we just mentioned show how liberal feminists use the democratic system to push for better conditions.

Radical feminism: The feminist theory of radical feminism aims to challenge societal norms and power structures that are based on traditional gender roles. According to this theory, patriarchy is the root cause of oppression in society, where men hold unequal power over women. Radical feminists believe that society's power structure is dualistic, with one half consistently oppressing the other half. In this case, men oppress women, while women are also oppressed. To combat sexism, radical feminists advocate for the removal of traditional gender roles and the empowerment of women in positions of power.

Socialist feminism: Back in the day, socialist feminism was known as one of the more radical and controversial branches of the feminist movement. Essentially, this approach tackles women's inequality from two angles. Firstly, it links capitalism and patriarchy together. Secondly, it shows that oppression doesn't just come from patriarchy. In order to do this, the first step is to highlight how women's traditional roles, like being a homemaker or primary caregiver, contribute to their

subordination. From there, the second step is to demonstrate that oppression can take many forms, such as based on race, class, sexual orientation, education, and more.

Eco-feminism: Eco-feminism is a philosophical and political movement that seeks to address the interrelated issues of environmental degradation, gender inequality, and social injustice. It is based on the belief that these issues are interconnected and can be traced back to the patriarchal structure of society, which has historically privileged men over women and disregarded the natural world.

Eco-feminists argue that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are two sides of the same coin and that the domination of one is intimately linked to the domination of the other. They believe that by addressing the root causes of these issues, such as the capitalist economy, we can create a more just and sustainable society that values the well-being of all living beings, human and non-human alike. Eco-feminism also recognizes the intersectionality of social justice issues, acknowledging that environmental degradation and gender inequality disproportionately affect marginalized communities, such as women of color and low-income populations. By taking an inclusive and intersectional approach, eco-feminism seeks to create a more equitable and sustainable world for all.

Discussion:

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution both had an impact on the lives of women in France and other parts of Europe by presenting the possibility of greater freedom and equality. A significant early "feminist" writer, Mary Wollstonecraft is best known for her work "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," which was published in 1792. She maintained that women and men should have

equal legal rights on the basis that they are equally human, have similar moral worth, are rational, and have the same amount of freedom. It was unacceptable for women to be limited by their sexuality to the extent that they were denied equal rights in the areas of education, the law, the economy, and politics. When gender equality had been achieved, there would have been a positive paradigm shift in the way men and women related to one another. In the United States, Margaret Fuller's activity and publications, particularly *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), are viewed as an alternative origin for Western feminism (with Wollstonecraft's).

Fuller, like Wollstonecraft, believed that education was the key to women's independence. Since the beginning of the French Revolution, the women's movement has become an increasingly important topic. The concept of "equality" was central to the bourgeois revolution, and one of the goals of the revolution was to grant women equal legal standing. Men who saw the need for universal male suffrage and advocated for rights for the industrial working classes typically opposed extending such rights to women. This was especially true of the right to vote. Women held out hope that their interests could be promoted through the vote and parliament as male suffrage slowly expanded throughout the course of history. The fight for the right of women to vote emerged as the most prominent aspect of what is now known as "first-wave feminism."

It is possible to consider Mary Wollstonecraft's work, published in 1792 and titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, to be the forerunner of such suffragette groups. She is actually considered the founder of British feminist criticism and gave suffragettes advice on how to fight for women's rights. In this book, she argued in favour of women having the same legal, social, and moral rights as males.

The Subjection of Women (1869) by J. S. Mill endorsed these rights. Heavily influenced by his wife, Harriet Taylor, Mill promoted the idea that women should share the same rights as men in terms of reasoning, education, and the ability to work and vote. The first wave of feminism slowed down dramatically after the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, which provided women the right to vote.

In 1893, New Zealand was the first nation to grant women equal voting rights with males. The United States followed in 1920. This was a crucial turning point in the history of feminism. It is thought that the next continuous feminist movement began in the 1960s, despite the fact that many of these activists continued to struggle for women's rights after the decade had passed. As was the case with the first wave, which emerged in the midst of a period of social transformation, the second wave emerged in the midst of various other social and political movements. Between the first and second wave of the women's rights movement, French feminist author Simone de Beauvoir released a seminal work that established the tone for the subsequent wave.

Her 1949 book, "The Second Sex," gave broad definitions of womanhood and showed how historically women have been regarded as second to males. In 1953, "The Second Sex" was released in the United States following its initial publication in France, where it soon became a phenomenon. Not only was Beauvoir a feminist author but she was also regarded as a philosopher due to the fact that her writings frequently addressed complicated and philosophical issues.

Ten years after "The Second Sex" was released in the United States, "The Feminine Mystique" by American feminist writer Betty Friedan helped spark the second feminist movement as Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (1970) and, most famously, Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch (1970) were counted as path-breaking works. Friedan's 1963 publication draws upon Simone de Beauvoir's earlier work. In addition to using philosophical theory to describe feminism, Friedan also

incorporated oral histories and her own personal experiences to address the challenges that many women faced at the time. Friedan first looked into the role of women in society to see if other women felt as unhappy and "malaise" as she did as a housewife.

In the 1990s, several feminists felt that second-wave feminism had become rather outmoded. Significant civil liberties and legal advancements for women had taken place. Developments in technology, such as the contraceptive pill and labor-saving technologies for the home, have liberated women from the constraints of unexpected pregnancy and the tedium of housework that hindered previous generations. The third-wave feminist movement developed in response to the second-wave's perceived faults. This movement originated in the 1990s and has now expanded to include postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism, and gender studies.

The feminist philosophers affiliated with this movement campaigned for women's social justice. Third-wave feminists have expanded their objectives to include queer theory and the elimination of gender role expectations and stereotypes. It is related to efforts such as the "Every Sexism Project" and "Me Too movement." The Me Too Movement was an effort to stop sexual harassment and assaults that women experience in public and at work.

The most important thing that De Beauvoir contributed was changing the focus of the man vs. woman debate from being about a biological basis to being about a social one. She argued that women are socially conditioned, schooled, and prescribed so that they might adopt the role of "women," and she positioned gender as a social category rather than a just biological one in her theory. In this regard, de Beauvoir was one of the first feminists to turn to a social constructionist argument of gender. According to this theory, social conditioning, contexts, and structures create specific roles based on biological differences; however, these roles are then seen as 'natural'

and timeless. According to her, women are not born but are created through a predominantly male-centric indoctrination process, which has relegated women to the status of second sex and inferiority. Simone de Beauvoir notes:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.

No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society;

it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

According to Butler's theory (1990), gender is not a predetermined and unchanging set of values and roles that are assigned or imposed by society; rather, it is a performance or role that is enacted by individuals. Naturally, this gender performance is social in the sense that it is enacted, validated, and accepted by the society in which it exists. The theorists were able to imply that gender is not a stable category by suggesting that gender is a performance. The meaning of gender is contingent on the location, time period, and cultural frameworks within which it is performed. To put it another way, gender is a performance that is ongoing, and the meaning of this performance cannot ever be fixed for all time or universal. This 'performance' is the repeated citation of the role in particular contexts.

As Judith Butler put it: 'Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. The feminist endeavor has been to reclaim a tradition of writing by women in which alternative world views and values are presented, distinct aesthetics are used, the reality of women is not reduced to how men believe it should be, and in certain instances, new opportunities for society itself

are offered. An outline of this kind of alternative canon may be found in Dale Spender's book "Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Writers before Jane Austen," which was published in 1986. Spender was responding to male critics such as F. R. Leavis who believed that the only women authors worth reading were George Eliot and Jane Austen. Even though women writers had been publishing since the 1750s, Elaine Showalter demonstrates in her book "A Literature of their Own" (1977) how nineteenth-century England ensured a secondary position for women authors. This was the case despite the fact that women writers had been publishing since the 1750s.

Showalter demonstrates that the female author was placed in a difficult position. To begin, the predominately male critical opinion confined her writing to select topics, which in turn limited the scope of her writing. These topics covered issues concerning the home, children, various styles of attire, and cuisine. This meant that in terms of literary practice, these were the only topics that a female author could write about if she wanted to be published at all, let alone read. Yet, the same male establishment criticised the work of the female novelist, dismissing it as insignificant or restricted because she primarily wrote about domestic topics such as fashion and food.

Women needed to resist the repressive ideology and practice of patriarchy through alternative narratives that would give women a safe space for experimentation and the development of a unique artistic genre. A Room of One's Own (1929), initially written as a lecture that Virginia Woolf was invited to deliver at Girton College Cambridge in 1928 on the topic of 'Woman and Fiction,' filled this need and laid the groundwork for feminist critique at the same time. She also provided a concept called "Androgyny," which was related to the idea of both female and male perspectives, one can produce a piece of writing in a harmony where both sexes can reside together. She was inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's concept of androgyny who had said that 'the mind of a true artist is androgynous.'

Elaine Showalter, a prominent figure in American feminism, posed a challenge to Virginia Woolf's notion of androgyny. In the essay that she wrote in 1979 titled "Toward Feminist Poetics," she presented the idea of gynocriticism as an alternative conceptualization for the examination of women's poetry. The field of study known as gynocriticism focuses on the historical investigation of works of women's literature that were penned by other women. It involves two different lines of thought: the ideological or phallogocentric approach, in which women were actual readers and consumers of literary writings; and the consumerist approach, in which women were actual writers. This interpretation offers a critique of the erroneous interpretations and stereotypical images of women that are seen in literary works produced by men.

The approach that was defined by Showalter, Gilbert–Gubar, and the early feminist critics did not sit well with later-day gynocritics. Critics like Mary Jacobus, Bonnie Zimmerman, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who were influenced by deconstruction, began to criticise the early feminists by saying that they were replacing one tradition (one that was dominated by men) with another (female). A critical stance of this kind, post-1980s feminists claimed, grouped all women together into a single category, as if their experiences were interchangeable and identical to one another.

Conclusion:

Therefore, the term "feminism" refers to a social movement that began as a series of resistance movements against the concept of patriarchy, social injustice, and the role that capitalism plays in the oppression of women. These movements were begun through several social movements. In its early stages, the feminist theory was a disorganized and chaotic system of opposition to phallogocentric thinking and practice. These days, however, it is a well-established discipline

of critical inquiry and research. The goal of feminist literary theory is to create literary discourse that is parallel to male-centric literary discourse while simultaneously reclaiming and creating women's autonomy in social and cultural realms. As a result, modern feminism includes a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, including post-structuralists, psychoanalysts, Marxists, and Postcolonialists, all of whom want to de-center male ideology in order to define, establish, and accomplish women's social justice in all domains.

References:

1. Raina, Javeed Ahmad, and SET MA. "*Feminism: An Overview.*" *International Journal of Research* 4.13 (2017): 3372-3376.
2. Bennett, Judith M. "*Feminism and history.*" *Gender & History* 1.3 (1989): 251-272.
3. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism.* Pearson Education India, 2009.
4. Simons, Margaret A. Beauvoir and "*The Second Sex: Feminism, race, and the origins of existentialism.*" Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001.
5. Wollstonecraft, Mary. "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.*" *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Yale University Press, 2014.
6. Beauvoir, Simone de. "*The Second Sex.*" New York: Vintage Books 1989, c1952. Pdf
7. Woolf, Virginia. "*A Room of One's Own.*" New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Pdf.
8. Showalter, Elaine. "*Toward a Feminist Poetics,*" *Women's Writing and Writing About Women.* London: Croom Helm, 1979. pdf.
9. Banks, Olive. "*Faces of Feminism a Study of Feminism as a Social Movement.*" (1981).

10. Ferree, Myra Marx, and Carol M. Mueller. *"Feminism and the women's movement: A global perspective."* The Blackwell companion to social movements (2004): 576-607.