

FEMINISM: A POLITICAL CRUSADE AGAINST PATRIARCHY

Sona Gaur

*Assistant Professor, Department of English and Communication Skills,
A P Goyal Shimla University, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.*

ABSTRACT

The collective protest against the male- hegemony is termed as, 'feminism', which struggles to raise women's consciousness against their age old victimization and evolved as a reaction of women to their status in the family and the society. Feminism as a term first appeared in France in the 1880's, in the Great Britain in 1890's and in the United States in the 1990's. The rebellious woman's movement covered every aspect of women's life: political, economic, social, cultural, religious and legal. Feminism as a movement is divided into three phases, the first wave (1840-1920), the second wave (1960-1980) and the third wave (1980- current). The wave metaphor suggests that at certain periods, the tide of feminist ideas surged forward to reshape the political landscape, while at other times it appeared to ebb into the distance. Thus, suggesting a continuity of the movement with its different phases.

Key Words: *Feminism, Feminists, First wave, Second wave, Third wave, Patriarchy, women, oppression, empowerment, gender, sex and marriage.*

INTRODUCTION

Women are integral part of any society, without whom no society or country can ever progress. Fifty percent of the world's population is that of women but sadly they have been denied their due in all spheres of life. Unfortunately, a woman has been victim of marginalization and patriarchal oppression. She is looked down upon as a weaker sex, servile to men and valued solely as a sex- object for pleasure and procreation. The subservience of a woman from the primitive times and the consequent differentiation made between the two sexes is rooted in the sexual functions women perform as child- bearers. This biological essentialist nature of a woman in the course of time has confined her to motherhood and domesticity and connotes that certain female qualities are universal to women which result from their biology, are inevitable, therefore, justify their secondary status.

Patriarchy has been held responsible by feminists for women subjugation in society as it is the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women in family and society. It is a system of social structures and practices in which masculine point of view is placed at the centre of the world view, culture and history. "It is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 16). This society

has shaped and is still shaping the worldview of humanity which holds oppressive maxim such as, 'this is a man's world' and 'women are weaker sex'. 'Gender' as a term is strongly connected with patriarchy as it is a social construct, which connotes that the capabilities, roles, expectations, responsibilities and behaviour of men and women are different due to their biological differences. Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* Observes that, "Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place..." (42).

The inferior status accorded to women and the various forms of sexism inflicted on them could be traced in the history of every country down the ages, where they adhered to their gender identity. During the nineteenth century in the West, however, women for the first time appeared to be awakened of their subjugation and asserted their individuality. They articulated their desire for equality and questioned the patriarchal norms that reinforced their secondary status in the society. This collective protest against the patriarchal society is called 'feminism'. Feminism is first and foremost a collective term for system of beliefs and theories, which give special attention to women's rights and position in a society. On the individual level it is a state of mind, a way of thinking, and an alternate perspective from which to understand the world.

The feminist first wave (1840-1920), is generally identified with the mobilization of strong feminist and consciousness- raising activities in the mid- nineteenth and early twentieth century in Europe and North America. The movement is concerned with many egalitarian and radical issues focusing on the equal rights for women, educational and legal reforms, abolition of slavery and the suffrage equality (the right to vote). "An organized women's suffrage movement emerged when a new reform bill became a possibility in the mid-1860s. John Stuart Mill included women's suffrage in election programme when he was elected to parliament in 1865" (Smith 8). Many feminist writers, through the medium of literature too addressed the issues of women , where they criticized the male point of view of describing women as adjunct to male, having her no independent identity. Feminist writers who emerged during this wave and contributed significantly towards the momentum of the movement are, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Astell, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor and Virginia Woolf. They appeared to be awakened and conscious of women's secondary status and exploitation in society. These writers are propelled by the impetus to dismantle all the systems that perpetuates inequality between both the sexes and justifies gender oppression.

The political identities created by the first wave feminists, laid the foundation stone for the second wave of feminism (1960-80). The term "second wave" is coined by Marsha Lear and referred to the increased feminist activities in USA, Britain and Europe from the late 1960's. "It brought in its wake an awareness of women's rights and her equal status with man. Self-help groups and socio-activists raised themselves to raise a voice against the subjugation and oppression of women" (Paul 7). Second wave feminists, struggled for granting greater political freedom to women to improve their lifestyle, economic condition, educational status and reproductive rights. Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most significant writers of this wave, who has contributed tremendously towards the success of the feminist movement. Her *LeDeuxiemeSex* (1949), that is later translated in English as, *TheSecondSex*

(1953) is hailed as the Bible of feminism. She believed, that women have never shared the world equally with men as they have been complete dependents on him, which is not a biological truth but an outcome of their social conditioning. Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Shulamith Firestone, Bell Hooks and Marilyn French are the second wave feminist, who wrote passionately and extensively about the patriarchal oppression of women. The period till the 1990's witnessed revolutionary forms of feminism, which continued in the form of third wave after the nineties and is also known as contemporary feminism. Third wave characterizes the feminist beliefs and perspectives of the generation of women, who articulate more individualistic ideas as compared to the more collectivist attitudes that defined the feminist movement during the earlier waves. Third wave feminists describe feminism as a movement that focuses on every women issue, whether small or big, prevalent in a society, as according to them all experiences of women are significant. It arose from the perceived failures of the second wave feminism as the feminists point out that the reforms made by the earlier feminists have not been woven into everyday lives of women. The very invocation of the third wave and the mobilization of the adjective, 'third wave' indicates a desire by women to link with the previous feminist waves and ensure a continuation of the feminist principles and goals. Rebecca Walker, an American writer and daughter of Alice Walker coined the term "third wave feminism" in 1992. Naomi Wolf is another significant name associated with the third wave, as during the initial years of this wave, she became the leading spokesperson of this wave, with the immense success of her book *Beauty Myth* in 1992.

Third wave feminists illustrate the limitations of the second wave feminism by stating that it voiced the experiences of only the upper class White heterosexual women and ignored the interest of other women like the Black women, who are doubly oppressed by the patriarchy and racism. These feminists question and redefine the meanings of gender, sexuality and womanhood. Radical notions of gender and sexuality is a major feature of this wave. They emphasize the importance of sexual liberation in a life of a woman to attain complete control over their lives and bodies and stress that an individual must be aware of first how his gender identity and sexual norms have been shaped by the society. "Third wave feminism seeks to challenge and expand the common definitions of gender and sexuality" (Shukla 11). It is through the consciousness that an individual realizes that his gender identity is not inherent but derived. Third wave feminists have elaborated on the 'queer theory', which suggests that sexual identities or sexual orientations are not fixed and it is a free choice of an individual whether to subscribe to the homosexual or the heterosexual behavior. Third wave feminists glorify the "girlie culture" and "lipstick feminism", which connotes that a woman should be free to do all that gives her happiness and makes her feel good about herself. They embrace popular culture with its style, fashion and beauty products and call it 'lipstick feminism'

Third wave incorporates a variety of elements from other disciplines to analyze the feminist study, like Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism, Cultural Studies, Post-Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Psychology, Sociology, History, Law, theories on Racism and Womanism and many more. Thus becoming eclectic in its approach. The well-known third wave feminists

are Rebecca Walker, Jennifer Baumgardner, Amy Richards, Judith Butler, Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, Katha Pollitt and Kathleen Hanna. These third wave feminists have contributed tremendously towards the progress of the feminist movement and “Calling themselves feminism’s Third wave, this generation of women writers and activists have claimed feminism as its ‘ birthright’, a constant presence in woman’s life” (Akass 65). Feminism in the contemporary scenario is working its way towards equality for women on a global scale. Even though the label ‘feminism’ often has been attached with negative connotations, young women today have embraced the term as a symbol of womanhood. Feminism has also created pride in generation of contemporary times by enlightening them of the struggle of earlier generation of women and fosters a healthy attitude towards being a woman and not simply an opposite of man.

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