



## THE POLITICS OF GENDER: AN OVERVIEW OF BASIC PRINCIPLES OF FEMINISM

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### Abstract

*Women since ages have had to live in an oppressive patriarchal world where discrimination on the basis of gender has deprived her of her right to be considered equal, to live a life of dignity, to work without fear and violence. In every field of human endeavour i.e politics, literature, philosophy, religion or law, she has been marginalized, considered an “other”, exploited and never been given the due credit for her contribution. She has been manipulated, suppressed, silenced, ignored and reduced to an object of sexual gratification. However one phenomenon that has brought a huge change in the lives of women has been the rise of feminism-a struggle for the rights of women. There has been a world-wide struggle against oppression and exploitation of the patriarchal order that for centuries deprived women of all her rights because of her gender. Feminist revolution has given voice to the millions of women who now seek to speak out after a long period of humiliation, surrender and silence and assert their right to be heard. Asking for their personal space, women are not afraid to raise their voice against the centuries old gender based suppression, and rightfully, claim their right to equality, dignity, and self realization. The paper is a modest attempt to outline and discuss the basic issues and concerns of feminism and feminist literary criticism. While discussing the views of seminal writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Toril Moi, it aims to understand the basic premises of this movement that brought about a paradigm shift in the ways in which a women is perceived and treated in our society.*

#### **What is feminism and feminist literary criticism?**

Broadly speaking, **Feminism** refers to a wide range of political, social and ideological, cultural movements committed to achieve political, cultural, personal, economic, and social equality of sexes. As per the *World book of Encyclopedia* "Feminism is a belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men". It is a label for social movements that stands for the rights of a women claiming equality without any prejudice of sexual difference. Humm observes "Feminism incorporates diverse ideas which share three major perceptions : that gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men; that patriarchy shapes this construction; and that women's experimental knowledge is a basis for a future non-sexist society". Feminism is a political and cultural label for the struggle of women against the gender based oppression and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society that considers her a weaker sex, deprives her of a dignified existence by

encroaching upon her human rights, and limits her to gender defined specific roles that are culturally imposed by the dominant patriarchal society.

Similarly, Feminist literary criticism is study, analysis, discussion and evaluation of literature (and other cultural production) informed by the principles and politics of feminism. It studies the ways in which literature has represented women to lay threadbare the prevailing ideological assumptions that serve to undermine or reinforce the oppression of women. By undertaking a rigorous study of the literary, social, religious, anthropological works of our past great writers they demonstrate how our culture has been inherently patriarchal.

### **Formative texts of feminism**

Feminist Criticism owes its origins to the writings of Mary Wollstencraft's of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792), and John Stuart Mill's 'The Subjection of Women'(1869). A tremendous impetus to it was added by the writings of Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' (1949), that imparted strength and direction to the burgeoning women's movement. Lamenting the condition of women in society, in this seminal book, she writes "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." She successfully manages to shatter the myth of 'femininity' and exposes how women, despite their great contribution are treated derogatorily as 'weaker sex', and relegated to the background. She asserts that 'male' and 'female' are biologically determined categories, whereas 'masculine' and 'feminine' are social constructs. And it is in the interest of patriarchy to conflate 'female' with 'femininity' and to imbue 'femininity' with meanings like submissive, emotional, irrational, talkative, etc and reserve meanings like intellectual, strong, rational, active for 'masculinity'. Articulating the concerns of a woman she reflects "All agree in recognising the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity." For her "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth". Gender in this patriarchal order does not simply remain restricted to mean difference of sex but goes on to imply and reinforce inequality, oppression and inferiority for women.

Another seminal work, Kate Millet's incisive book 'Sexual Politics' (1969) broke new grounds and proved to be a foundational book for feminists discourse. Acknowledging the immense contribution of Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter said: "A revolution needs leaders, and with Sexual Politics Kate Millett came forward to give the Women's Liberation Movement a

national voice and a strong connection to higher education. She was an intellectual and a radical feminist who could also speak effectively to a wide general audience.” This powerful critique of patriarchy provided insight into the structuring and working of patriarchy that leads to the subjugation of women. She argued that in a patriarchal setup all power is in the male hands and ‘the essence of politics is power.’

### **Phases of feminist movement**

There is a tendency among intellectuals to divide the timeline of the history of feminist movement into three waves.

- The First wave: It refers to the earlier phase of the feminist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this phase the movement was characterized by emphasis on educational rights, suffragette and working conditions for women and girls.
- The second wave (1960s-1980s): During this phase the major concerns of the movement were the inequality of laws, cultural bias against women and the role of women in society.
- The third wave of feminism (since 1990s) focused on the diversity of "women" while laying emphasis on gender, identity, nation, social order and even sexual preference.

This movement during the latter half of twentieth century, while breaking new grounds, branched into different directions. Feminism became feminisms. There were Radical, Liberal, Marxism, Black, French feminisms etc coming forth.

Liberal feminism: One of the earliest forms of feminism, liberal feminism drew attention to the secondary status accorded to women in our society and worked to eliminate gender inequality. With their basic principles rooted in liberalist philosophical traditions, they demanded equal rights for women. They made a concerted effort to bring change within existing social structures trying to change people's attitudes.

Radical feminism argue that the women's oppression originates from gender roles based on male supremacy and institutional structures of patriarchy that consider male as the norm. Unlike the liberal feminists, they tended to be militant with their efforts and focused their efforts on completely demolishing the structure of patriarchal society which they found to be biased and unjust to women. These feminists formed consciousness raising groups to raise awareness and mobilize support to actively fight against women's oppression.

Marxist and socialist feminisms believe in the idea that the source of women's oppression is their economic dependence. The solution is full-time jobs for women, with the state providing paid maternity leave and child-care. But, what the state gives, the state can take away. State policies reflect state interests, not women's. Women are worker-mothers or just mothers, depending on the state's economic needs.

Multi-ethnic feminism is a powerful political movement aimed to redress social, economic and cultural discrimination of oppressed groups in diverse range of societies and cultural settings.

Black Feminism claim that black women have to face an even more repressive and oppressive structures as compared to white women. They believe racism and sexism in collusion impose a exploitative system of domination of male and subordination of women. Whatever maybe the particular issues and concerns of these various feminisms, there are basic principles that unify these approaches.

**Basic principles of feminist literary criticism:**

1. The basic view of our civilization is patriarchy in which women is oppressed and subjugated.
2. This social, cultural, political subjugation is done through all pervasive patriarchal hegemony and ideology in which women themselves don't know that they are being exploited.
3. Gender is a social construct. Masculinity and femininity are patriarchal construct oppressive in nature for women.
4. All major social, religious, political institutions have been characterized by male dominance.
5. The contribution and achievements of women intellectuals, historians, artists and literary writers have been largely ignored as they have been considered insignificant from the male point of view.
6. Women is relegated to a marginal position and has been defined only by her difference from male. She has been considered the other.
7. Male experience, viewpoints, opinions, tastes, preference and values have been considered standard, normative and paradigm case.

**Strategies employed by feminist critics:**

1. Feminist critics, theorists and creative writers take typically feminine subject matters in literature as their primary interest. These include the domestic household, mother daughter relationship, child birth, menstruation and gestation, for example.
2. They examine how works of literature embody patriarchal attitudes and contribute to sexual politics leading to exploitation of women. They expose the sexual politics in the work.
3. They may use tools from other disciplines like psychology, linguistics, history to serve their feminist purpose.

4. While reading a text, they resist and challenge traditional male assumptions that were thought to be universal.
5. They analyze the works of authors from a vast range of subjects, not restricted to literature alone, to see how women has been represented, in order to know if there is sexist bias in their works.
6. They attempt to challenge or redefine the established literary canon which has been dominated by men, to include more women writers.
7. They undertake to demonstrate the worldliness of text i.e. how literary text are directly connected to the ideas about gender, sexuality and power structures of the real world.
8. They reveal the inherent phallogocentric bias in the language which uses the masculine pronoun for the universal.

### **Impact of feminism**

Feminism as a broad cultural, social and political movement has brought a huge change in the ways women today have started living their lives. Today they are perceived as equal partners and play a prominent role in politics, academia, business, law, religion, etc. In the realm of cultural and literary studies too, the impact of feminist literary criticism has been far reaching . It has transformed the way literature is studied setting new agenda and method of literary analysis. It has fundamentally altered the canon of what is taught and set new agendas for literary studies. It has led to a tremendous shift in the treatment of themes, characterization, tone, tenor and idiom in literary studies. It has signaled the dawn of new era that is characterized by a challenge to the male hegemony and patriarchal oppression and a determination on part of women to attain a new identity, asserting her right to be heard, asking for her personal space, and claiming her right to equality, dignity, and self realization.

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