



9. Understanding Western Feminism and Some Reflections on the Indian Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract

Western feminism began with a protest against the pathetic condition of women in Europe in the medieval period. When the women of the Western world demanded equal rights for women vis-a-vis men, it was called feminism. In an attempt to understand the reason for subordinate and low condition of women in the west, feminist thinkers understood that sex is something that is acquired naturally at the time of birth. At the time of birth, there is a difference of only one organ between a boy and a girl, but society treats and raises boys and girls differently. Due to the difference that the society makes in their upbringing, women behave in a different way and men behave in a different way - this is gender. So according to western feminists, the natural physical difference between boys and girls is sex while gender is a social construct. Girls are brought up by society to be soft, servile, domestic, and obedient because society is patriarchal and it wants to keep women subordinate to men. Due to this patriarchy, the condition of women in the west had become extremely pitiable in the medieval period. Western feminism emerged in protest against this patriarchy and the pitiful condition of women. Feminists have raised the issue of women's rights. She demanded equal rights and opportunities for women and was successful to a great extent. The present review-based paper attempts to understand emergence of the western feminism in brief along with some reflections on the Indian Feminism.

Key words: Western feminism, sex, gender, patriarchy, women in Europe, three waves, types

Introduction



Men and women both are necessary for the survival of the human race and they should respect and honor each other so that the human race can flourish and progress but in some societies and in some periods, women were humiliated, exploited and tortured by men. Women faced inequality and had to raise their voice for their rights. One such time was the Middle Ages when women in Europe had to face adverse circumstances and to get out of that situation, the women of Europe demanded equality of opportunity and that ideology came to be known as feminism. Western feminism demands an egalitarian society in which men and women get equal opportunities.

Status of Women in Europe in Ancient Times

In ancient times, there was polytheism in Greece and Rome in which many gods and goddesses were worshipped. In ancient Greece, a goddess named Hera was worshiped who was the protector of women. Athena was the goddess of wisdom. Artemis was the goddess of hunting and Aphrodite was the goddess of love. Goddesses were also worshiped in ancient Rome, such as the goddess Juno who looked after women; Diana was the goddess of the hunt; Minerva was the goddess of wisdom and Vesta was the goddess of home and kitchen.¹ In ancient Greece, women in Sparta had the right to inherit ancestral property, participate in politics and become runners. They had better status than the women of other city states. They were expected to take care of the home and children and participate in cultural and social events. Even in ancient Rome, women's main responsibilities were home and children, but they received education; owned property; ran business and participated in social and cultural programs. But their role in politics was limited.²

The Miserable Condition of Women in Medieval Europe/Dark Ages

The medieval period was from the fifth century to the fifteenth century, which was mainly the period between the Roman Empire and the Renaissance.³ In Medieval Europe, women were clearly considered inferior to men. Women faced many legal, economic, and religious challenges. Married women were dependent on their husbands. They could not sign agreements; nor testify in court. They could not borrow money in their own name. However, women worked in the markets. As per criminal law, women were tied up and burnt to death for committing murder. Some modern historians attribute this to misogyny.⁴ According to them, the reason was that at this time there were three prominent Abrahamic sects in Europe - Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. In these sects, the beginning of humans was believed to be from Adam and Eve. Eve was held responsible

for Adam's expulsion from paradise. It is believed that Eve brought ignorance and evil into the world. She is naturally disobedient and responsible for sexual arousal among men; hence she should remain under the control of men. Therefore, in this period in Europe, women were considered to be the property of their close male relatives. They were made to sit on the left side of the church. The Latin word for left means evil or dreadful.⁵ At this time, there was a severe famine in Europe, and the plague called 'Black Death' halved its population. For the above reasons, the Middle Ages were also called the Dark Ages in Europe.

The Dire Situation of Women in Europe during the Renaissance Period

Even during the Renaissance period, a woman had to surrender her property to her husband upon marriage and marriage was the main work or career or business for a woman. Although in this period, there was a woman ruler in England, but common women had very few legal rights. Their status was lower than that of men. They were under the control of their parents in childhood and under the control of their husbands after marriage. Unmarried women were not allowed to live alone. They either lived with a relative or had to become a nun. This was a time when half of the babies born died.⁶ During this time, the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic resistance to the reformation took place. The protests and counter-protests increased violence against women and fear among women. This was a time of strict patriarchy. During this period, men controlled all aspects of society. Men were at the center of all social structures. Every household was a small kingdom in which the male used to behave like a king. Men had control over all the property of the family. All social, religious, political, economic, and legal institutions were run by men. They also had complete control over their unmarried and widowed relatives. At this time there used to be 'witch trials/ hunts' in which intelligent and uncontrollable women were killed by branding them as 'witches'. In this way, about fifty thousand women were killed.⁷

Reforms of the Age of Enlightenment

Coming in close contact with other parts of the world like India brought positive changes in Europe and they gained knowledge and wealth which led to economic prosperity, scientific thinking, and social reforms. Individualism and rationality helped women in society and challenged the prevalent role of women in European societies. Women started to read and write 'novels' and discuss contemporary and intellectual issues in 'saloons'. They started discussing

their own condition and this was the beginning of Western feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' in 1792. She emphasized on women's education and said that it would benefit children, husband, family and the country. She did not demand equality between men and women but emphasized that women are also humans, hence they are rational and logical and women should also get education like men so that women can become good companions of men. Mary argued that life and freedom have been given by God to all human beings – including women.⁸

First Wave of Western Feminism

The first phase of feminism is considered to be from 1792 to 1963, which starts with Mary Wollstonecraft, who was called the 'Grandmother of Feminism'. In this period, there was a demand for legal equality and rights such as suffrage, family allowances, contraception, abortion, security, domestic labour, and maternity assistance. Apart from Mary, it also included Susan B. Anthony, Olympia Brown, Lucy Stone, Helen Pitts, John Stuart Mill. Women Suffrage Committee was formed in England in 1865 and after a lot of struggle; women got the right to vote in 1928.⁹

Second Wave of Western Feminism

The second wave of feminism started in the United States of America in the 1960s and was called the women's liberation movement. By 1980, it spread throughout the Western world. Its main issues were – women's identity, real or actual inequality, legal inequality, marital rape, domestic violence, divorce, equal pay, homosexuality, sexual violence, sisterhood, domesticity etc. Betty Friedan wrote the book 'The Feminine Mystique' and was called the 'Mother of Feminism' Simone de Bouva 'Second Sex'; Robin Morgan's edited book 'Sisterhood is Powerful'; Susan Brownmiller's 'Against Our Will'; Kate Millett's 'Sexual Politics' was the main book of this wave. 'Commission on the Status of Women' was established to improve the status of women in America.¹⁰

Third Wave of Western Feminism

The third wave started in 1980. Rebecca Walker first used it. There was diversity in this wave - women's problems started being seen from the perspective of color, nationality, religion also. Its

main issues were - domestic violence or harassment, sexual harassment, right to abortion, reproductive right, maternity leave, women's rights in the workplace, problems of black women, post-colonial, post-modernism etc. The main thinkers of this wave were - Barbara Smith, Bernice Johnson, Alice Walker, Judith Butler, Nira Yubal-Davis.¹¹

Sex, Gender and Patriarchy

Western feminism holds patriarchy responsible for the secondary status of women. It believes that most societies are patriarchal, that is, in most societies, men are considered superior to women. Inheritance, tradition, and property are in the name of men. Men have the right over resources like education, jobs, business, property, power etc. Women have to struggle to get these. According to western feminism, in a patriarchal society, women are limited to domestic work and if they do not accept it, they are subjected to violence. They are confined to their bodies. The reason for this as per western feminism is misogyny.¹² Misogyny is a Greek word which is made up of two words. - misein and gynē. The Greek word 'misein' means hatred and 'gyne' means women so misogyny means hatred of women.¹² This word comes from Greek Mythology. According to Hesiod, before the advent of women, men were living peacefully with Gods. Then Prometheus stole the secret of fire from God which angered Zeus, the God of the sky. Zeus created a woman named Pandora who had a jar which contained bad things like disease, old age, death, hard work etc. Pandora opened it and all these evils came out. Similarly, Tertullian says that being a woman is a curse and woman is the devil's hand. Aristotle believed that woman is an incomplete man.¹³ So the hatred towards women comes from the past.

Western feminists believe that sex is something that is acquired naturally at the time of birth. At the time of birth, there is a difference of only one organ between a boy and a girl, but society treats and raises boys and girls differently. Due to the difference that society makes in their upbringing, women behave in a different way and men behave in a different way - this is gender. So according to western feminists, the natural physical difference between boys and girls is sex while gender is a social construct. Girls are brought up by society to be soft, servile, domestic, and obedient because society is patriarchal and it wants to keep women subordinate to men. In other words, Western feminism believes that the body given by nature to the child at the time of birth is its sex and is natural but due to patriarchy, society treats boys and girls differently and gives them

special treatment and a distinct identity. This identity given by society is called gender. Society makes the girl soft; teaches her household chores; teaches her to remain silent; teaches her to play with dolls; teaches her to take care of children, home and cooking; teaches her to submit and obey the orders; and teaches her to remain dependent on men like a child all her life. So society makes her a woman. This is called gender construction in feminism. Feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir says that "A woman is not a woman by birth, she is made a woman." Similarly, society teaches boys to be boys. Society gives them cars and guns to play with; hardens them; encourages them to earn money and fame; prepares them for leadership; makes them decision makers. That is, society associates bravery and self-confidence with 'masculinity' and shyness with 'femininity'. Western feminism opposes this process and thinking. According to them, only the process of conception, pregnancy and lactation are natural. Apart from these, the tasks that are given to women in the division of labor are imposed by the society and because of these imposed tasks, women are discriminated against.¹⁴ Therefore, the opportunities that the society gives to men, it does not give to women. Therefore, Western feminists thinkers demand that girls should also get all the opportunities that boys get. They do not demand a matriarchal society, in which lineage and property passes from a woman to her daughter only.¹⁵ They basically want equal rights and opportunities.

Types of Western Feminism

Western feminism started with the demand for equality of opportunity, which was called **liberal feminism**, but with the change in time, various other types of feminism emerged. Western liberal feminism demands that women should overcome the legal inequalities imposed by the society and the state. Women should be given all the rights that men have, for example, political, economic, family, social, and educational rights, such as owning property, working, voting, etc. **Marxist feminism** advocated child care arrangements at the workplace and equal remuneration or pay for men and women. Demanded care for women and equal pay to men.¹⁶ **Militant feminism** demanded solutions to problems like rape, violence, murder, exploitation, domestic violence. For this, it demanded protection for victimized women. **Postmodern feminism** rejects gender binary and accepts gender fluidity. **Postcolonial feminism** considers the problems of black and non-



Western women that emerged from apartheid or foreign or external rule. **Eco-feminism** looks at the connection between women and environmental protection.¹⁷

India and Feminism: After expansion in the West, due to Western influence, feminist ideology also spread in countries like India through education system and media. Although the status of women in India was good during the Vedic period, it changed due to invasions and insecurity in the medieval period and the foreign and colonial rule that followed. Since medieval times many evils arose in the Indian society such as child marriage, *pardah* system, *jauhar* system.¹⁸ Also poverty and patriarchal system were planted in India by colonial powers and as a result discrimination against women arose due to which Indian women also found themselves in a secondary position in the society. For example, before invasions and colonialism in the Indian society men were known by the names of women like Kaushalya Nandan Shriram (Ram- son of Kaushalya), Sitapati Shriram (Ram- husband of Sita), Anjaniputra Shri Hanuman(Hanuman- son of Anjani), Radhavallabh Shri Krishna (Krishna- beloved of Radha). However, after invasions and colonialism, the children started being known only by the name of their father. Before invasions, women excelled as scholars, warriors, and administrators and were worshiped but after invasions many restrictions were imposed on them and they had to face many problems due to birth of many ill customs such as child marriage, illiteracy, *jawhar*, *pardah* etc.¹⁹ Social reformers, governments of independent India and changing circumstances contributed to the solution of the above problems. Many problems were resolved and women were empowered. Although many challenges and problems still remain before Indian women, but Western feminism is not the solution to the problems faced by women in India. The solution to the problems of Indian women is possible only in the Indian way because there is a difference in Indian and Western culture and circumstances. Moreover, Western feminism has created many problems in Western societies which India must avoid.

Conclusion: There were historical, social, political, and cultural reasons for the origin of western feminism due to which feminism originated in the West. Liberal feminism brought positive changes in the status of women by providing equal rights and opportunities to women, but some other types of feminism had a negative impact on children, elders, families and society. Indian women, society and country need to be alert about this and need to be conscious of their rights as well as their duties.



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