



# JOURNEY OF FEMINISM TOWARDS HUMANISM

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## ABSTRACT

*The ideology of feminism is to bring significant change in social attitude and politics to construct a social structure based on equality. This would eradicate the phenomenon of superiority-inferiority relations between male and female genders. Feminism aims at gaining equal status and opportunities for women on par with men in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. In this sense feminism is a socio-political movement which aims at eradicating male dominance in all spheres of life right from private activities to family and socio-cultural activities. Thus feminism, the self-conscious and systematic ideology, is a women's movement, for women's rights, by women. This movement considers gender equality as a human right, in this sense feminism can be considered as humanism.*

**Key Words:** *Feminism, Male Dominance, Gender, Marginality*

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Nature of Feminism:**

Feminism is explored as a social movement, political movement, and a field of study and knowledge. Initially the term 'Women's Rights' denoted the movement started for women. Alexandre Dumas, a French dramatist, first used the term 'feminism' in his pamphlet 'L'Homme-femmo', in 1872, prepared to designate the then emerging movements for women's rights. The term feminism is derived from the French word 'feminisme'; it is a medical term used to explain biological features.

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Feminism broadly aims at rejecting masculinise approaches to explore issues of women and bring forth the feminine subject matter from a distinctive feminine point of view. Raman Seldon in his book *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* mentioned The feminists argued that authority to explain is reserved with men which never includes feminine perspective and even the knowledge on feminine world is the product of male mind. Women's 'suffrage movement' started in America and England to seek electoral rights for women and then Married Women's Property Act of 1940's lead to large scale women's movement for their rights and liberty from patriarchal dominance. The growth and development of feminist movement can be measured in terms of waves. The first wave feminists fought for equal rights of women, legal rights to property, access to education and workplace, and right to custody of children. On the next level the second wave feminists generated a body of knowledge while addressing social marginalisation of women. The third wave feminism focused on micropolitics and addressed the issues of sexual harassment of women at workplace. During third phase the feminist movements got the global perspective which was found on the material conditions of men and women. Thus the movement started with 'Rights Perspective' to get democratic rights and legal reforms regarding women got transformed into 'Liberation Perspective' focusing more on equality, dignity, and liberty.

The phenomenon of not being able to differentiate between 'me' and 'not me' is address in Kristeva's concept of 'abjection'. The term abjection is what the subject seeks to expel in order to achieve an independent identity. In her views women are not only marginalised outside social-sexual norms but is being expelled from the scene.

Elaine Showalter's concept 'gynocritics' explored the idea of an independent study of women's writing. The gynocritics complain that feminist writing was thrown at the background and their voice was silenced by their male counterpart. Gynocritics believe that women have different mind than that of men and can use different language to express their feminine feelings, experiences, and expressions. In this regard Virginia Woolf's writing searched for feminine identity and feminine style in literature. Ellen Showalter has observed specific features of women's writing which are the result of social conditions and the nature of women's experiences. She believes that women's is a 'muted group' but its cultural boundaries overlap with that of male group. She firmly states that men has established their control over female by establishing concepts like 'the chest mother' and 'whore figure' to represent women and define their position in culture. Mary Elman, while defining the terms like feminist, feminine, and femaleness, says that criticism must be asexual. According to her feminist can be described as a political situation; femaleness is a matter of biology; and feminine refers to a set of culturally defined characteristics.



Irigaray believes that to break the silence imposed on women she must change the symbolic codes through her own language, which is not based on phallogocentrism. She suggests an active rewriting from women's point of view, "of the female body, and of the possibilities of the female body as a site for the production of knowledge (172). Writing became the medium to voice the repressed female libido and female sexuality which invented a new kind of writing to access her real strength and discover her sexuality rooted in her own body- its pleasures and its desires. Helen Cixous promoted the notion of the 'écriture feminine' which means rejecting the masculine self and incorporating the other in such a way that questions the patriarchal ideology and demonstrates femininity by creating new order. Helen Cixous in her work *The Laugh of the Medusa* says:

Kate Millett in her work *Sexual Politics* explores more on the construction of gender in the patriarchal setup. For her patriarchy is nothing but a political organisation traditionally conceptualized in kinship structure under the rule of dominant male, to institutionally exploit women by all means. According to Millet women accept and internalize the prevailing ideology of femininity along with her own inferior status which makes them dependent and weak. In *Sexual Politics* she says,

The social feminist Juliet Mitchell says that the exploitative and unjust conditions for women are result of four distinct overlapping structures: production, reproduction, sexuality, and socialization of children. She believes transformation of all these four structures would create an opportunity for women's liberation. In her work *Women's Estate* (1975) she explains four social functions tang women perform are: they are members of workforce and are active in production; they bear children and thus reproduce human species; they are responsible for socializing children; and they are sex objects.

### **Idea of Gender Theory:**

The World Health Organisation defines gender as socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. The terms Gender and Sex seem synonymous but Robert Stoller, the psychologist, uses term 'sex' to refer to biological traits and 'gender' to refer to the amount of femininity and masculinity exhibited by an individual.

Judith Butler asserts that gender is performative and not a biological trait. She believes that men and women repeatedly stylize their body within a highly rigid regulatory frame which ultimately defines their gender and if they refuse to perform the socially assigned gender script, gender will cease to exist. She says it is heterosexuality that produces sex and gender in binary form and not vice versa. She pointed out the existence of gender in a series of acts which are revised, renewed, and consolidated from time to time. Judith Lorber is also of the



same view that gender difference is a socially constructed phenomenon and employed universally to justify gender stratification.

The hierarchy of power structure is deeply rooted in cultural and social organisations of the society. Feminists believe that this hierarchy is the result of unequal gender structured society based on femininity and masculinity. The very inequality is exemplified in Helen Cixous's idea of patriarchal binary thoughts:

Here Helen Cixous explains how the perception of gender stereotypes exist in the grading scale. Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) argues that the natural reproductive difference between men and women has led to sexual division of labour and construction of unequal class system. This ultimately, has contributed to women's oppression by male dominated society. According to Firestone women need to revolt against the existing hierarchy, exhibited through family, motherhood, marriage, and all those systems which provide ideological support to sexual division, in order to liberate herself from oppression and subjugation to male dominance.

Thus gender theorists believe that gender differences are not the result of procreation, sex, physiology, hormones, anatomy, or any kind of genetic predispositions but it is the result of purposeful social processes leading to develop the gender based unequal social structure and individual identities.

## Gender Discrimination

All over the world men strongly believe in the idea of 'superiority of male over female' on the basis of biological differences. It leads to further biological exploitation of women by men through reproducing and rearing children. The opposition between nature and culture form the basis for patriarchal sex-gender discriminating system. Influence of gender discriminatory ideologies encoded in language creates belief system. Foucault examines the way in which According to Simone De Beauvoir there exist two classes of individuals whose appearance occupation in clothes and interests are completely distinct from each other

## Gender Socialization:

In the process of socialization individuals learn from each other in the natural environment and the process continues throughout life. Simone de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* firmly claims that women are not born as women but they rather become women through the process of socialization, where social discrimination based on gender inculcates moral and intellectual effects in women so profound that they appear natural and not man made. According to Elisa Mortorano 'gender socialization is a constant influx of influences that we experience from the



moment we are born that governs the way we are supposed to think and conduct ourselves based on our sex. socio-cultural, educational, and family background affect gender socialization which in turn develops gender stereotypes.

## Gender and Sex:

The terms 'gender' and 'sex' are used to distinguish between 'sexed bodies' and 'gendered behaviour' of an individual. Feminist criticism and theorization is based on the basic distinction between sex and gender. Judith Butler claims that sex is biological and gender is a social construct. Sex is stable across cultures. On the other hand, gender is a social construct and it is not stable, it may vary over time and across cultures. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) conceptualized the notion of gender as a 'free-floating artifice'. She says,

Gender needs to be studied and understood against a given socio-historical background. Sex determines an individual's status either as a female or male. Gender is all about the way an individual feels and behaves.

## Gender Stereotype:

Judith Butler claims that gender is the product of roles played by women in male dominated socio-cultural environments. In her Publication *Gender Regulations* she defined gender as, The behavioural patterns of individuals in socio-cultural environments and specific attributes exhibited by them give rise to their gender as men and women. There are certain general gender stereotypes which overstate the qualities to distinguish men and women in artificial categories. Male gender is generally identified with the attributes like assertive, self-sufficient, independent, and achievement oriented. And the attributes like kindness, affectionate, others oriented, and warmth are associated with feminine gender. These types of stereotypes codify male gender stronger and above female gender. However the social roles played by male and female gender change in the stereotypes.

Greer in her book *The Female Eunuch* (1970) argues that women are socialized to carry on the repressive standards of the Eternal Feminine Stereotype. She suggests women should reject the bondages of marriage and rearing children, instead she must be proud of her sexuality rather than allowing male to treat her as a sexual object. She wants women to understand how collectively they have been psychological and physically devalued. She rightly says,

## Idea of Patriarchy



The term 'patriarchy' is derived from the word 'patriarch' meaning 'father' or 'chief of race'. Oxford Dictionary defines patriarchy as: This means men hold the power and women are largely excluded in every sphere of life. The patriarchal system supports empowerment of men in every sphere of human life and disseminates women for domestic work.

The system reflects men's freedom and women's subjugation. According to Simone De Beauvoir women make their choices and see themselves not according to their true nature and self but through the lens of a man's attitude. She advocated the family structure which is centred upon a balanced couple that displays equality in difference and difference in equality. Zillah Eisenstein in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (1979) defined it as a and argues that correlation between capitalism and male supremacy results in exploitation of women.

The concept of patriarchy is deeply rooted in the very notions of masculinity and femininity of every society. Male enforce and exercise their dominance and power over women through patriarchal personal institutions like marriage, sexual practices, reproduction, and child rearing.

## Indian Feminism

Woman's image and the roles she plays has been studied and observed from different dimensions and the experiences and knowledge regarding the same have been recorded. Parth Mikhherji in his *Sex and Social Structure* has pointed out the three processes with respect to the development of the position of women and explains how men are propelled into outside world and women get confined inside the home. He points out that:

Feminist movements were initiated in the Western world, but the women's sufferings are universal and Indian society is no exception to it due to its patriarchal social system. Indians who got educated in Western countries reflected upon Indian socio-cultural systems that are characterized with inequalities, operation, and injustice. The feminists initiated discussions on gender equality, sexuality, women's rights, women's emancipation, etc. The most notable factor of Indian feminism is that it was initiated by men and it did not lead to gender war fares like Western feminism. After independence the Indian Constitution provided equal rights to men and women in every sphere of life and by legal means provided equal status to men and women.

Indian feminist movements were not as rigorous as the Western's. Actually, Indian social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Behramji Malabari, Durgaram Mehtaji, DK Karve, Khwaja Altaf Hussain Ali Sheikh, Mohammed Abdullah, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Pandita Ramabai challenged, old and hard to eradicate, inhuman



traditions and customs regarding women like Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, purdah system, polygamy, *devdasi*, widowhood, etc. Their efforts brought women the right to education, equality and freedom. The British government passed legislations banning Sati (1829), permitted widow remarriage (1856), and determining the age of consent (1891). After Independence the Indian Constitution give women human rights, equality, and liberty from caste-gender discrimination.

### Dalit Feminism:

The mainstream Feminist Movement in India was questioned by the National Federation of Dalit Women established on 11th August, 1995 at New Delhi to carry out Dalit feminist movement at National level, which was already working in Maharashtra since 1990's. Dalit feminists claimed that mainstream Indian feminism is *Brahmanic*, hierarchical, and mostly dominated by upper castes who focus on questions of class and gender and have missed the question of caste and gender. Dalit women expressed that they are triply exploited on the basis of their caste, gender, and patriarchy. They raised the thought of questioning patriarchal system existing in their own caste or community. They are the victims of external as well as internal patriarchal system. In internal patriarchy Dalit women are exploited by Dalit men only and in external patriarchy Dalit women are exploited by non-Dalit women and non-Dalit men. Dalit women also face discrimination and violence in their daily routine caused by class-caste distinction.

In the Western world, the literature of 18th century reflected feminist movement in the works of John Stuart Mill and William Blackstone and their theories favouring equal rights to women. *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, which literally stirred the consciousness of the society of the time. The nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of worldwide women's movement demanding equal rights for women in political social economic and educational sphere. The psychological, linguistic, and social theories about gender construction and difference were highlighted by the feminist movements in 1960's.

Considering Virginia Woolf's writing on the issues of women, Mary Eagleton addressed her as 'the founding mother of contemporary debate'. Virginia Woolf contributed in the first wave of feminism through her texts entitled *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) exploring women's material disadvantages as compared to men. Virginia Woolf did not call herself as a feminist but her work *A Room of One's Own* is generally taken as 'the forceful modern tract on feminism' which emphasized on the fact that women's literary production should explore female experience in its own right and not from a comparative assessment of women's experience in relation to men. Whereas, her second work *Three Guineas* explores in depth feminist ideas regarding allowances for mothers, reforming



divorce laws, and proposing women's colleges and newspapers. She believed that gender identity is socially constructed which can be changed as well as transformed. She suggested that femininity need to be unconscious so that women can escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness. She emphasized the Bloomsbury sexual ethic of 'androgyny' and promoted the idea of balance between a male self-realization and female self-annihilation.

Simone De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* opposes an androcentric ideology and gave a statement that shattered the myth of femininity: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine" (267). Simone De Beauvoir explored feminist ideas from the point of view of various disciplines like psychology, biology, and history. Another feminist writer Betty Friedan contributed with her work the *Feminine Mystique* (1963) to establish the base for the revolution. Kate Millett published her text *Sexual Politics* in 1969 and argued that women are in demanding position where they are insecure due to preference given to male child in the patriarchal social system. The militant feminist Germaine Greer in her text *The Female Eunuch* (1970) argued that the idea of marriage must be abolished. In this regard Miti Pande in her work *Feminism in British and Indian English Fiction* quoted the reason given by Greer who says, "If women are to affect significant amelioration in their condition it seems obvious that they must refuse to marry" (7). The radical feminist and their works like Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Eva Five's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970), Mitchell's *Women's Estate* (1971), and Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), *The Sociology of Housework* (1974) and *Housewife* (1976) all promote equality for women.

## CONCLUSION:

Indian women and their status in all spheres of their life has changed since the beginning of 20th century. Earlier her identity was completely swamped under Patriarchy and she was identified only in relation with men. She was glorified in her survival through the sufferings inflicted upon her and the *pavitrata* ideal. She was imprisoned in the glorification in the image of herself as a caretaker and centre of the culture and traditions. The literature of the era reflects the change in women's status in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres.

In this sense feminism is a socio-political movement which aims at eradicating male dominance in all spheres of life right from private activities to family and socio-cultural activities. Thus feminism, the self-conscious and systematic ideology, is a women's movement, for women's rights, by women. This movement considers gender equality as a human right, in this sense feminism can be considered as humanism.





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