Feminism: Introduction and Aims

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Abstract: The present paper aims to analyse the theory of feminism and intends to define feminism and proposes to put forward the historical background, the different kinds of feminism and what goals this theory focuses on. Different theorists define it in their own ways. The paper focuses on various issues which are raised by the feminists with the passage of time. It explains how woman has been victimised for ages in the name of customs, ideals and honour. An effort has been made by the feminists to bring about change in the society and provide equality based on gender. The feminists also aim to bring about changes in society by thoroughly analysing the literature written until now and critiquing the portrayal of women in these works of literature.

Key Words: Feminism, Feminist, Gender Study, Patriarchy.

Feminism is an ideology or way of thinking which seeks equality for men and women in social, economic and cultural fields. The feminists aim to bring about change in society in order to provide equal opportunities to all and hence prevent discrimination based on gender. “Alexander Dumas; the nineteenth century French dramatist was the first to use the term ‘feminism’ for the movement for women’s political rights” [Sharma 4].

According to Sally J. Scholz, “Feminism follows the critical project with action to bring about social change” [2], whereas “Feminist might mean a movement for social change or it might mean a concern for all forms of oppression” [3].

According to Scholz, the history of this movement goes back to two centuries back of struggle for equal cultural, legal and political rights mainly the Suffrage rights, which is called the first wave of feminism. The pioneer works of the first wave are A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) by Mary Woolstonecraft, The Subjection of Women (1869) by John Stuart Mill and Margret Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845). In the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf wrote “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) and several other essays on women writers and the traditions which limit their expression and prevent them using their talent.

Launched in 1960s-70s, the second wave feminism aims equal cultural and social rights. The Second Sex (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, Feminine Mystique (1963) by Betty Fridan and Sexual Politics by Kate Millet are the prominent works of feminism of this wave.

The so called third wave of feminism starts in 1990s, with the emergence of post-structural theories and based on the social construction of the Subject. A number of works have been written and being written on feminism since 1990s.

Feminism is of various types, and these feminisms have certain common assumptions and concepts, but their ways to explore the cause of the gender difference and privilege are different. According to Barbara Berg, feminism is a “broad movement embracing numerous phases of women’s emancipation” [qtd in Tandon 26].

According to Krishan Das, “Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical, fields” [248]. Thus, feminist theory includes various approaches to women’s roles and experiences and role of feminist politics in various disciplines.

In the words of Sally J. Scholz, “Feminist methodology takes the lives of women as central”. [3]. It analyses the works on the view point of women and seeks how their lives are portrayed—whether they are presented playing stereotypical roles, they are shown in oppressed status or in their unique roles or experiences. It explores the ways how women have been addressed in a particular text. Are they given their deserved place in a particular work or they are excluded from the social strata deliberately or unintentionally.

“Feminist methodology aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality” [Das 248]. They explore the real cause of the inequality prevalent between men and women in society. They aim to expose the politics of power relations as the basis of this inequality. Women being generally weaker as comparable to men biologically make them think that they are inferior to men. These power relations decide the position of men and women in society. By making the women subservient to them, men want to exert their own power on them.

According to Krishan Das and Deepchand Patra, feminists explore the themes like “discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy” [148]. They explore what is the basis of discrimination between man and woman in society, how males and females are assigned stereotypical roles and how they succumb...
or reject these roles. They explore how woman is objectified and oppressed as portrayed in a literary work. They explore and make patriarchy responsible for the oppression and subordination of women in society. Man woman relationship is also critiqued by the feminists.

According to Scholz, “Feminist theory often uses narratives and histories to challenge and improve existing theories or to propose new ones” [4]. Presenting their works as female-centered, the feminists challenge the existing norm of male-centered literature. They challenge the accounts of history written by men excluding women altogether. They suggest for writing a new history written by women.

The feminists argue that woman is a social construction. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine” [295]. Scholz comments upon Beauvoir’s ideas:

**Desiring to be free and create their own meaning in the world, men fear this nature; and as a way to attempt to control it, they make woman the embodiment of nature through myth and custom. Men create the cult of the ‘feminine’ or the ‘feminine mystery’ to maintain the oppression of women. Women are taught how to be women, i.e., passive, object-like, free beings mystified into believing that they are confined to particular ‘natural’ roles which limit freedom. So, a girl is raised to believe that her destiny is to be a wife and mother and that she will experience satisfaction in these roles.** [68]

They are internalized so that it appears that the roles women are assigned to play are ‘natural’ and not ‘man-made’. Thus female is constructed as a woman or feminine – socialized or conditioned according to the terms of society. Toril Moi aptly differentiates between three terms- feminist, female and feminine, which are rather considered as same. The first is “a political position”, the second is “a matter of biology” and the third “a set of culturally defined characteristics” [Moi 117]. Moi further argues:

**Patriarchy, in other words, wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of feminality, called femininity. Feminists, on the contrary, have to disentangle this confusion, and must therefore always insist that though women undoubtedly are female, this in no way guarantees that they will be feminine. This is equally true whether one defines femininity in the old patriarchal ways or in a new feminist way.** [123]

Feminist theorists “realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence” [Barry 121]. Feminists read and re-read the earlier literature and challenge the images of women presented by them and also provide with the critical appraisal of these images. M.A.R. Habib writes:

**Indeed, the depiction of women in male literature as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender.** [43]

Feminists theorists challenge the representations of women as “Other” as “lack” or as part of “nature”. They try to explain that man and woman are different to some extent due to biological difference, but they also point out that they are presented different as they are constructed differently in society. Man is considered responsible for earning the money whereas woman is assigned the duty to look after the family and the household.

Feminist theorists also point out the role of language in human life. They recognize that all the institutions are constructed by society through language to dominate the fair sex. French theorist Helene Cixous posits the existence of an incipient “feminine writing” (écriture feminine) in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”- which implies the feminine practice of writing [Abrams 104]. They think that language is not a neutral and transparent medium of communication, but it is based on patriarchy.

Another claim of feminists is that “patriarchal (or ‘masculinist’ or ‘androcentric’) ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature, and which until recently have been written mainly by men for men” [Abrams 102]. The writings, which are considered canonical writings including Oedipus Rex, Tom Jones, Hamlet etc., are written by men and they are about men. Women are altogether excluded from these canonical writings. Feminists propose for the construction of a separate canon for women’s writings.

Thus, the main goal of feminism is to oppose woman to be treated as a sex object and to provide her equality with man. She must be treated as a human being and not an object for male-gratification. To change the mindset of women as well as men that the world is a place to live for both men and women.

**References:**


