

Women Empowerment and the Rise of Feminism

Abstract

Feminist criticism is a result of the women's liberation movement. Feminism as a literary and social movement is related to the fighting of women for their right to vote. It is a movement for their political right and for their attempt of self assertion. The second issue that came to focus at social level is patriarchy. Women activists started fighting against the established social system of patriarchy. Feminism is a philosophy of protecting the rights of women and a platform for fighting against the social injustice against women. This article makes an attempt to focus on the different phases women's liberation movement and the consequent rise of Feminism.

Keywords: Movement, Wave, Assertion, Momentum, Discrimination, Exploitation, Patriarchy, Identity, Empower, Equality.

Introduction

Feminism is an ideology which seeks not only to understand the world but to change it to the advantages of women. It aims at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women. Feminism focuses on the marginalisation of women and how they are being relegated to a secondary position.

Most feminists believe that our culture is a patriarchal culture and it is organised in favour of the interests of men. Feminist literary critics try to explain how power imbalances due to gender in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary texts. Feminism is a movement for the empowerment of women. It is a social movement which redresses the gender imbalance in society.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to find a connection between women empowerment and the movement of feminism. Being popularised in the early twentieth century, feminism struggles for securing women's suffrage and the later socio- political movement for women's emancipation from patriarchal oppression. The term 'feminism' has its origin from Latin word 'femina' which means 'woman' and that refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power. It also advocated for equality of sexes. In short, feminism represents one of the most important social, economic, and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. With the setting of the modern period, women began to snatch spaces for themselves to be at par with men on the grounds of 'equality of sexes'.

Text

Feminist literary criticism grew out of the new women's movement in the late nineteenth century, which is also referred to as Women's Liberation Movement, and is also called the second wave of feminism. The first wave of feminism was the suffrage movement in the west in the early twentieth century when women fought for the right to vote.

That the women were fighting for their political right was first sign of their self assertion. They had to hold strong protests, they were harassed and imprisoned. Ultimately, they resorted to hunger strikes and they were granted their political right to vote. In the late sixties the demand for equal rights for women and for ending oppression and exploitation of women gained momentum.

Women activists started questioning the discrimination against women in patriarchy. 'Patriarchy' literally means the rule of the patriarch, that is the father, and by extension it means the rule of man. Patriarchy is the social system in which we are living, which is controlled by man, which values man and everything associated with man, and which sees woman as inferior, a second rate citizen, but not an individual in her own right.

Her existence or identity is always seen in relation to man. She is not given an independent identity of her own. The socio political movement for women's rights questioned the sexist bias of patriarchy against women

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and it sought to empower women, to secure social, cultural and legal equality, freedom and justice for women.

Feminism is the only serious, coherent and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures. Feminists believe in a few simple tenets. They believe that women are human beings, that the two sexes are equal in all significant ways, and that this equality must be recognised publicly.

Feminism is, thus, a humanistic philosophy which believes in the basic humanity of both men and women. It is certainly pro-women but it is not anti-men, it is anti-patriarchy. It aims at an order of equal relationships rather than hierarchical control of one half of humanity over the other half. The struggle at the heart of women's liberation, however, is not a struggle for privilege, but for equality and self determination. It is a struggle women share with all humans.

Theoretical foundation for women empowerment and feminism is said to be laid by Simone-de-Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, which are pioneering books in this field of thinking. De-Beauvoir's phrase 'the second sex' with reference to women cut ice, she opines that woman's idea of herself as inferior to man and dependant on him springs from her realization that the "the world is masculine on the whole, those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men" (Beauvoir 298).

She asserts that "one is not born but becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 273). De Beauvoir constructed an epic account of gender division throughout history, examining biological, psychological, historical and cultural explanations for the reduction of women to a second and lesser sex. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, a phenomenal study exposes the ways of male dominance over females and also explores the task of feminist critics and theorists.

It reveals the patriarchal politics, whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the women. Millet shows the dichotomy of the feminine as a cultural bias. She asserts that patriarchal authority has given woman a minority status that inflicts on her "self-hatred and self rejection, contempt both for herself and for her fellows" (Millet 55).

Kate Millet has titled the second chapter of her book as 'Theory of Sexual Politics'. This chapter is quite crucial to understand the mechanism of human relationship. The term 'politics' shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. Quite rightly, the essence of politics is power. One can analyse three components of power equation as status, role, and temperament.

One might designate status as the political component, role as the sociological, and temperament as the psychological- yet their interdependence is unquestionable and they form a chain. Those awarded higher status tend to adopt roles of mastery, largely because they are first encouraged to develop temperaments of dominance. In our traditional set up

patriarchy holds the power equation. Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and connection with the larger society.

The feminist movement in the beginning largely aimed at the consciousness raising, that is, making women conscious of their subservience, subjugation, deprivation so that they would rise against oppression. Gradually it gave to a lot of debate and discussion about the causes of women's subjugation and the degrees and varieties of oppression of women. As a result several types of feminist thought emerged within the broad framework of feminism, such as radical feminism, liberal feminism, socialist feminism, materialist feminism, Marxist feminism, black feminism, etc

Radical feminism, which is the dominant position in American feminism, sees patriarchal oppression essentially in terms of gender oppression. It believes that patriarchy is the primary cause of oppression of women because it elevates men to positions of power everywhere- in personal, social, economic and political spheres. The radical feminists wish to create a woman's culture as separate from men's culture in literature, arts, spirituality, sexuality, etc.

Apart from radical feminism another major strain in feminism is socialist feminism (also referred to as materialist feminism, it includes Marxist feminism). Socialist feminism believes that women's oppression cannot be understood without considering their specific historical context. In addition to gender they see class as a crucial factor in determining the situation and the degree of oppression of women.

Black women oppose not only sexism but also racism in their fight to end oppression of women. The concept of the problem of race and gender is central to black feminism, which primarily refers to the feminist position of African women. The feminists of this group vehemently question the assumptions of the white feminists as their issues and problems are completely different.

Gynocriticism is a new brand which attempts to retrieve women writers from oblivion, to trace a history or tradition of women writers, and to study creativity of women and literature of women as a separate entity. An attempt to formulate an idea of feminist aesthetics leads to a discussion of various elements in a literary work such as language, form, structure and subject matter.

Conclusion

Since feminist issues are rooted in socio-political reality, so more trends of thought and new terms keep on emerging. In the 1990s the term 'postfeminism' first appeared in the American media as a negative term to denounce feminism. However, this negative term did not get much acceptance. On the contrary, in the academic circles the term postfeminism is used to indicate feminisms intersection with other schools of thought such as postcolonialism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Postfeminism, in fact, represents feminisms maturity into a confident body of thought and refers to its pluralism. The rise of Feminisms is a result of the multiplicity of the social issues related to the women's liberation movement. It is also a product of

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the complex socio-political reality where women are destined to function.

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Remarking

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