

## **Writing Feminism: The Razzmatazz of Western Feminist Thought**

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### **Abstract**

Feminism has been an on-going battle of late and considering the condition of women in contemporary times too, it can be safely concluded that the feminist movement shall flow unabated. Women have been undauntedly making stupendous efforts, intellectually, culturally, sociologically and politically, to make their concerns heard but the quintessential emancipation from the patriarchal, chauvinistic yoke is yet to be realized. With the passage of time, women have succeeded in carving a niche for themselves in the male-dominated set up, but oppression and injustice towards them is still rampant in different walks of life. The present paper is an endeavour to have an overview of the feminist ideological germination as it began and flowered in Europe and America so as to gain insight into the western feminist movement that created a theoretical (and subsequent actual) prototype of female liberation for the world to look up to, to evaluate, understand and follow.

**Keywords:** Feminist, patriarchy, self, ideology, emancipation

“....It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men...”

(Woolf, 2000, p.87)

Though it is a truth universally acknowledged that every feminist has his or her own idea or definition of feminism or so to say has his or her own personal versions of feminism, yet if we set out to capture the essence of feminism in a broad and simplistic manner, feminism can be understood as a popular socio cultural and also political stance that spells empowerment and emancipation for the female folk of the world in their contrasting coexistence with the men folk. Since time immemorial a pathway of resistance, revolt and resurgence has been intermittently embarked upon by females to make their voices heard, to register their presence and also to agitate to snatch or claim with dignity their rights, worth and equal treatment against the backdrop of an oppressive patriarchal set up. If taken theoretically, the very focus of feminism is on the socially-engineered concept of *gender* as a field of analysis whilst investigating the cultural practices and thereby, a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. It postulates

how cultural, historical, sociological and literary apparatuses are and have been exploited in a shrewd manner to *render* women as effete, pliable, naïve, illogical and seductive species capable of no significance at all.

The whole trajectory of western or European feminist evolutionary history can be traced back to the mothers of feminism there have been like, Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller who with their polemic works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) respectively, sowed the seeds of a nascent investigation into the whys and hows of the legacy of gender inequality or injustice. Wollstonecraft dismissed the ideational framework that looked at women as the weaker or second sex and attributed the whole secondary condition of women to patriarchal conspiracy that denied them basic rights and privileges like education. Castigating writers the old writers/philosophers who were against female literacy, she even exhorted the women to rise above the stereotype of sentimentality and stupid mawkishness they had been pushed into, and embrace and practice rationality in thought and behavior to ensure their betterment. She also explicated through her thesis how cultural and social impositions were deftly put on women, making them succumb into roles of the feminine created by men which according to Wollstonecraft was the process of initiating gender construction.

Fuller — an important figure in the American transcendentalist and philosophical movement with the likes of Thoreau and Emerson — fell in the league of feminists like Wollstonecraft who supported the emancipation of women and endowment of equal rights upon them. She advocated their right to ascent to the higher positions in different walks of life and frankly discussed male and female roles in the matrimonial structure too. However, unlike Wollstonecraft, she interestingly goes ahead and makes ideological claims about men not being purely masculine and women not being purely feminine either. Through this premise she is even noted for having made insinuations to androgyny and also transcendence or an overlapping of genders, a prominent ideological stance that was to take shape in times to come.

Much later, the dawn of the twentieth century saw the flowering of Virginia Woolf, one of the leading lights of the feminist discourse, who is also highly acknowledged for exploring and celebrating the feminine values, for bringing through her efforts “...something much more

interesting and profound than an advocacy of equal rights...” (Bennett, 1964, p.76) In her most celebrated work, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf has comprehensively talked about the social and psychological warp and weft of our society that deteriorates the woman condition and escalates gender inequality. A fiery and caustic writer, she spoke about the continual injustices done to women and their relegation to marriage and child-birth which smothered their very natural proclivities and genius. Like a guiding star, she advises women to firstly secure political rights and economic security and rights for themselves. Making a broad study of women writers across the literary history, she brings to light their respective environments and their adjacent struggles in creating and sustaining a creative space for themselves. She talks about the Victorian women writers like George Eliot, later Jane Austen and others, who, through their persistent efforts made women writing a triumphant possibility. She sees them as representatives of the *New Women* who succeeded in seeking not only social and economic liberation but also an intellectual space or horizon for themselves as they wrote as women and not as men. Woolf, through her treatise, becomes the optimistic pioneer of women liberation in its most sublime form as she believes that all that could not be accomplished or allowed to accomplish until now, will be grasped now as the germs of the geniuses of the past women of resplendent intelligence and vigour “...are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in flesh...” (Woolf, 2000, p.112)

With the coming of the second wave of Feminist thought, we witness the emergence of Simone de Beauvoir, the French writer, activist, existential intellectual who graces the most original and sanctimonious position in the first row of feminist theorists. Her canonical and groundbreaking book, *The Second Sex* (1981), which is celebrated as the bible of feminist thought that changed minds and history, is considered a classic study of the women's condition and plight. It marked a revelation and revolution in its own unique way.

To quote Whitmarsh, “...The book, because of its philosophical and personal approach, has dated less than some books, a consequence, in fact, of the very approach that prevented it from being a militant work. Although the public was not ready for it in 1949, the book seemed in

1981 to be too conventional for some, but these people forget how radical it was at the time..” (Whitmarsh, 1981, p.14)

Presented to the world twenty years after Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own, The Second Sex* (1981) established the much needed dialogue with the society questioning women’s social and intellectual milieu. The bible of feminist thought is divided into two parts: Part I consists of three sections, Section I titled *Destiny* dealing with definitions of woman – her body, mind and feelings; the analysis of family as offered by historical materialism; section II *History* entailing an anthropological inquiry into the evolution of society, the rise of patriarchy, capitalistic economy and the changing condition of women; Section III *Myth* interrogates the whole literary canon and the presentation of women therein by the male writers. On the whole, the former part makes a study of images of women that forge them into the *Other*. The second part discusses women’s lives in contemporary times – covering different stages of childhood, adolescence, youth, marriage and old age. Beholding the social and psychological experiences of women, Beauvoir creates a panorama wherein women are seen and labeled as lesbian, whore, narcissist and the woman who is in love. The conclusive section makes for a talk about the independent woman. This is how the latter portion of the book complements and completes the former as it explains how a woman is made a woman. Beauvoir’s legendary statement on society’s cunning arrangement in bringing this design to life is vital here. She says, “...One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine...” (De Beauvoir, 1981, p.295)

Challenging and examining the stock of knowledge hitherto created and passed down by men, Beauvoir through her book talks about the space and importance of women’s point of view. She smashes the bastions of established notions of female inferiority and male superiority created by the power dynamics of our patriarchal design through her defiant existential stance.

De Beauvoir has employed the tool of systematic deconstruction to realize her goal of an objective inquiry into the condition of women. Shattering the disconcerting silence of male

conspiracy surrounding the existence of women, she takes up her cudgels and speaks about the myths of convenience created by men in their religious discourses, ideologies, superstitions, cosmologies and literature wherein man is represented as the subject, the absolute, the all-powerful and woman as the object, the inadequate, as the Other. She even shed light on historical and physiological patterns of histories or historical accounts that validated the relegation of women to an abysmal background. She has explained the women's history as nothing but an inheritance of loss as the civilization was constantly working out for the economic and cultural uplift of the masculine world. According to her, the very narrative of feminism or the feminine history is a man-engendered thesis as men have controlled the fate of women and have determined what it has to be at every juncture of human history. This male hegemony spreading control and compression is borne out of the patriarchal insecurities, fears and ambitions too.

Assailing the machinery that works against women, Beauvoir lampoons the funny ambivalence accorded by the Christian church fathers like Tertullian, St Augustine, St Thomas and others of the medieval era who on one hand held women in utter abhorrence and on the other hailed them as *avtaars* or personifications of sanctity and innocence. Apart from the ecclesiastical echelons, Beauvoir even takes up authors like Breton, Stendhal, Claudel and others who generated their own doctored versions of myths about women after borrowing from the repertoire of the originally conceived great collective myths pertaining to them. She highlights how the aforementioned authors created archetypes of a woman by writing about them in certain specific, suggestive ways. Primarily painted as nothing but flesh, woman is projected in a soft and meek light as someone resembling Nature, the harbinger of the sublime and the poetic. This dichotomy of mythology appended with women is a convenient contrivance to make their situation all the more awful, and strengthen the vicious cycle of male oppression.

Beauvoir attempts a thorough working out of the very idea of the concept of the *Other* to make clear the position of woman in her relationship with man. In the introduction of her book, Beauvoir poses the question to the readership, "...What is a woman?". She rhetorically replies "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms, masculine and feminine, are used only as matters of form as

on legal paper. In actuality, this relation of the two sexes is not quite that of two electric poles, for the man represents both the positive and neutral (as indicated by the common use of man to indicate human beings in general), whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria without reciprocity...”(De Beauvoir, 1981, p.15)As long as a woman is continued to be defined in relation to man, the edifice of dissolution of her very own individuality will only get bolstered and robust.

Beauvoir’s political insights into the formation and workings of the tensions between man and woman is strongly evinced in her analysis of this unequal relationship. She puts forth her premise that different forms of knowledge are exploited to enslave women just as the colonial and political frameworks do. Male domination over the female body, mind and life is but one of the many colonial impositions that can be seen in the world as she explicates how variegated forms of slavery be it race, caste, class or sex harness the same model of oppression and also proffer the same shameless and irrational justifications for themselves. She finds an analogy between a slave or a colonized given anywhere in the world and a woman, and she validates how the two similar variables i.e. the woman and the slave are identically posited in relation to his/her master wherein the former is the Other and the latter is the Absolute. Women as any oppressed class are forced into a tacit bondage and compressed to play out inauthentic and inessential roles.

Beauvoir also underscores the importance of feminist knowledge as she exhorts women to take up writing about their experiences. Debunking the male narrative, she feels women must come up with their versions of self as none knows and understands them better the way they do themselves.

Another powerful feminist who is distinctly credited with being an important liaison between radical or conservative feminism and a proponent of the liberal human values of harmony and overall well-being , is the American Betty Friedan. A scholar in psychology, she is credited for initiating the resurgence of feminism in America. Founder of the National Organization for Women in 1966, Friedan with her strong and cogent works *The Feminine Mystique (1963)*, *It Changed My Life(1976)* and *The Second Stage(1981)*, worked wonders for the female situation in America. The very publication of *The Feminine Mystique* signaled the beginning of a major

contemporary American movement whereby the problems of the American woman, her identity-crisis were brought to the fore and discussed. She showcases the predicament of the American woman who is trapped in rat maze of domesticity and whose occupation is exclusively being the best housewife. The erstwhile image of the so-called happy suburban housewife with all gadgets at her disposal was shattering to pieces as by the onset of sixties, innumerable housewives were battling the ennui and nausea engendered by the monotony of housework. Not just the married women, but the divorced, the spinsters were all feeling tormented by an unidentifiable yet persisting streak of inner dissatisfaction and emptiness. Voicing their collective sense of dissatisfaction, she states "... most women adjusted to their to their roles and suffered or ignored the problem that has no name.." (Friedan, 1979, p.17)

Friedan worked out her psychological training and acumen to comprehend and also explain the new woman's problem. She sheds light on the basic premise that the fundamental human need is to grow or develop to one's full potential as is postulated by the multifarious psychoanalysts, biologists and philosophers. "...Man is happy, self-accepting, healthy without guilt, only when s/he is fulfilling himself and becoming what s/he can be.." (Friedan, 1979, p.269) Through her investigational approach to demystify the *feminine mystique*, Friedan researched and concluded the existential dilemma of the American woman, the life of her inner self and spirit – covering her emotions, ideologies, her choices, her decisions. She raised agonizing questions with regard to women's position and addressed the American educators to design a future plan of education and uplift that aided the women folk to secure riddance from a life of idleness, fatigue, boredom, sickness, drugs and despondency, and be strengthened enough to confront the vagaries of life. Herein there was an implicit instruction for women too to make efforts to rectify their course and edify their grim condition and context. Her maiden work can thus be aptly heralded as a vital treatise in the psychological emancipation, healing and coming of age of the American women. Her second book, *It changed My Life*, is a successive block in her intellectual monument of feminist thought that is basically rooted in the grand narrative of human rights movement or the human welfare that Friedan set out to talk about. It makes for a compelling compendium of the agonies and challenges combated by women in different walks of life like education, profession

etc and also limns the picture of the contemporaneous political campaigns undertaken to ameliorate the deformed structures pertaining to abortion, equal remunerations, fundamental and legal rights and prerogatives etc.

Her next work *The Second Stage* is an interesting notional inquiry into the response and responsibility that came with equality and emancipation. It set the tone for the feminist narrative that had entered a new phase wherein women were to play a refined role in the new socio-economic and political scenario.

Another potent advocate of the feminist rights in the western territory was Kate Millet, who with her work, *Sexual Politics* (1970) announced the arrival of a conspicuous voice critiquing the dominance of patriarchy. In her book, Millet has deconstructed the paradigm of patriarchy to show how it is actually a political institution and how it has worked out to oppress the females. As Mary O'Brien notes, it is a powerful, "...denunciation of the psycho/cultural ramifications of feminine inferiority and male superiority...It had a considerable social impact and it has played a substantial part in the escalation of feminists for women's places in contemporary American society..."(O'Brien, 1983, p. 82-83)

Millet was of the view that like all marginalized segments of society, women too have been deprived of the best of education, equality and acknowledgment. Theirs is a secondary position as they are ubiquitously under-represented, less paid and barred from authoritative positions. Political and sociological apparatuses are deliberately designed to thwart them from progressing and making their mark in society. Even media panders to the patriarchal ego and the whole paraphernalia is manipulated to put men on pedestal so much so that the human condition itself is defined in relation to or rather as *the* male condition and whereby women stand as nothing but a mere speck in the bigger picture.

Millet deftly defines and describes the construction of the governmental machinery that is a compound hegemonic product of power, consent and violence imposed on people. She also delineates the construction of *sexual politics*— how it is systematically formulated to create *the consent* and assure the latent consolidation of the patriarchal roots. She explicates how the male is projected as the master embodying virility, aggression and power, entrusted with the higher

aims of leadership and ambitions while female is cast as a doll or puppet personifying attributes like ignorance, weakness and passivity, expected to be nothing but a source of selfless and unconditional service to her family. The narrative of religion, property and culture in totality forge a subversive dichotomy of master and follower for male and female respectively and works to enhance and deepen the praxis of sexual politics.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion suggests that over-arching perusal of the western women's corpus of writings thus comes to display a dynamic interaction of the mind and the heart whereby the theorists-stalwarts have dealt with political, economic and social issues, ideological or theoretical perspectives on feminism and practical measures regarding women's uplift. It becomes an eloquent expression of a somewhat systematized arrangement and emanation of a serious discourse on females – encompassing their space, definition, denial, dilemmas, longings and challenges. Ensnared in their respective socio-cultural locale, each aforementioned feminist crusader has raised issues of universal significance concerning female suppression and atrocities. The very act of writing for themselves and the likes around them, has been an act of both intellectual and social rebellion and courage. It has helped not only them but the mammoth chunk of females across the world, to slink out of their lives of subjugation and drudgery and seek and realize their slice of liberation, solace and a true identity.

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