



## Contemporary Feminism: The Contestations Within

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### Abstract

*Over the years, feminist political theory underwent a considerable transformation. The range of issues that feminism seeks to address increased exponentially. More than any other normative theory, feminist political theory gave rise to various transformative movements and enriched the debates on issues like justice, freedom, equality, and change. Feminist theory carries within it an array of streaks that range from liberal feminism to socialist feminism to conservative feminism, eco-feminism, radical feminism, among others. At the heart of it lies the belief that women face discrimination in public life and they deserve to be treated equal and free. However different schools of feminist thought approach the understanding of women issues differently depending on the ideological frame of reference through which one looks at it. The present paper attempts to undertake an exploratory study of various contentions within the broader framework of the feminist political theory.*

**Keywords:** Feminism; Gender; Patriarchy; Women rights

### Introduction

Feminism emerged as a protest against the domination of women by men in all walks of life. It seeks to promote the role of women and empower them to seek their rightful place in society. Feminism views the existing social order essentially as male-dominated where women are positioned at a disadvantaged level. They reject the idea that the sexual differences are the cause of miseries of women. They instead argue that it is 'gender', a social construct, rather than a biological fact of sex, which stereotyped womanhood, designated her for less significant social roles. Feminism seeks to identify the institutions and methods of oppression, on the one hand, and, seek to identify the possible ways to challenge this oppression, on the other.

Feminism is highly diverse in its ideological positions. Some feminists look into gender from a liberal vantage point as they see a solution to the oppression of women in extending more liberties and rights to women. Others find liberalism essentially patriarchal and see it through a socialist prism. Similarly, feminism may seem to be compatible or incompatible with other theories such as communitarianism or ecologism depending on the type of feminist frame one looks through.

### The Social Construction of Gender

Classic debates on feminism revolved around liberal and socialist paradigms. Liberal feminism argues that subjugation of women could be addressed within a liberal framework where entitlements are given irrespective of sexual differences. They envision the role of a constitutional and democratic system in which men and women are given equal rights and opportunities. They believe that women subjugation can be addressed by incorporating legal and political reforms.

Socialist feminism believes that gender discrimination has to be looked through the prism of class exploitation and gender justice can't be achieved without putting an end to class exploitation. It views women exploitation through the larger prism of oppression under capitalism.

**Okin (1989)**, however, rejects the liberal notion of women emancipation in her critique of public/ private dichotomy. This division was meant to confine the role of the state to the public arena and to leave individuals free in their private realm which includes family. Invoking the slogan ‘the personal is political’ she maintains that through the construction of gender, the institution of family in itself is characterized by domination and power relationships. Gender, according to **Okin (1989)**, is ‘the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference’. Though the sex is biological and unalterable, patriarchal systems associate stereotypical roles with women which are socially constructed and informed by power relationships. Women are given low end, unsophisticated, unpaid and menial jobs, and when jobs are mechanized, sophisticated and paid then men take it for themselves. The feminine attributes (socially created though) such as emotional, peaceful, affectionate and motherhood are looked down upon as inferior values. Masculinity that expresses itself through ‘courage, bravery, violence’ is looked at with awe and respect. Women are socialized in a manner that they accept their subordination as something natural and unalterable. The value system in the society is essentially patriarchal which prepares women as second-class subordinate individuals. The male domination is sustained by social institutions, the legal system, education, moral codes—all of which favour the domination of men. Women are psychologically trained in a manner that they unquestionably accept the prevailing social norms which are essentially patriarchal and unjust for women.

Within feminists, there are some agreements and some divisions. Most of the feminists oppose the replacement of male-dominated order by a female-dominated one. Rather, they believe in an egalitarian society where women are equal partners in a free society. However, some disagreements persist about how to achieve equality between the sexes. The approaches to understanding the problem of gender exploitation gave rise to various ideological streaks which need some disambiguation to take the debate forward.

### **Evolution and the contestations within**

The history of feminist thought does not have an undisputed linear history. Even in ancient Greek though thinkers like Plato talked about equality of women in his ideal state. Similarly, some consider Christine de Pizan (1430) as ‘the first woman to write about the rights and duties of her sex’. With two of her famous books, “The Books of the City of Ladies” and “The Book of Three Virtues”, she sought social recognition for positive attributes of women. In 15<sup>th</sup> century France when women were viewed as the vile creatures, Pizan argued that women possess human qualities of humility, diligence and morality like men and were capable of excellence in every area of life. In almost every society voices had been raised time and again for the better treatment of women. However, the modern feminist movements across the globe are inspired by the scholarship and activism that emerged after the European Renaissance. For instance, the modern women’s movement had their origins in women’s clubs in late 18<sup>th</sup> century France and woman participation in the movements to abolish slavery in the United States. The Seneca Falls Declaration on Sentiments of 1848 organized by abolitionists made it clear in the opening line of the declaration: ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal’.

Therefore, it is very difficult to trace the origins of modern feminist thought in a linear historical way.

Earlier feminist ideas expressed around late 19<sup>th</sup> century centered on ameliorating the condition of women by extending her sphere of rights and freedom. Reform feminists argue

that the basic structure of society need not be transformed by a completely new system but some ameliorative changes are desired to be incorporated in the legal and political system so that women are not put at a disadvantaged position because of their sexual differences. Liberal feminists want equal opportunities to be provided to women alongside men and argue for removal of hurdles in the way of their socio-economic and political progress by the expansion of means to overcome their disadvantages. They suggest that arrangements be made, such as daycare facilities, paid pregnancy and maternity leave, framing of gender-sensitive policies and non-hostile environment. Besides, they suggest that men must change their attitude towards women and must share responsibilities for child rearing and other unpaid labor, which are otherwise called 'women's work.' Reformist methods of women empowerment are rooted in rationalist faith about human ability to overcome excesses through legislation and internal revival. Therefore, they reject the inevitability of conflict between the genders.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792), arguably the first liberal feminist thinker, writes that women are also 'human beings' and deserve the same set of rights and privileges that are enjoyed by men. Her writing came in the context of the French revolution, intellectual resurgence and women rights movements in Europe. Her feminism drew inspiration from the Enlightenment liberal belief in reason and a humanistic belief in equality (**Wollstonecraft & Mill, 1974**).

Wollstonecraft refuted the 'natural' distinction made by Rousseau and argued that both sexes are rational although she acknowledged that motherhood distinctly belongs to women. She famously stated 'Make women rational creatures and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers' (**Wollstonecraft & Mill, 1974**).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the demands of women movements and feminist scholars believed that effective participation in governance after securing the right to vote would lead to their empowerment. This period generally termed as the first wave of feminism stressed on equal political and legal rights of women. Female suffrage was its principal goal because it was believed that if women could vote all other forms of sexual discrimination or prejudice would quickly disappear. Political rights started making appearances in different walks of public life. The movement reached its culmination with the women's achievement of the right to vote in many European and North American countries in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The women hitherto denied equal legal and civil rights were now free to contest elections, become part of trade associations and sports clubs and enjoy personal liberties without gender discrimination. The intellectual foundations of liberal feminism lie in individualism-the belief in the moral worth and equality of individual irrespective of differences on the basis of caste, creed, religion, color, sex, etc. In this sense, any discrimination against women should be prohibited. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century feminism did not wish to challenge the difference between public and private sphere created by liberals to earmark the jurisdiction of state intervention. They wanted to keep the private sphere immune from state interferences and focus on the extension of educational, economic and political opportunities given to them in the public sphere. They, however, paid little attention to the issue of domination and exploitation within the family which comes within the ambit of the private sphere. Therefore, a new generation of feminists, which we shall discuss later in this paper, challenged this dichotomy of public-private divide and instead argued that even family relationships are characterized by the domination of men. However, in 1960's women rights movement resurfaced with vigor and vitality at the hands of a new generation of feminists. They argued that radical changes are required to affect changes

in the patriarchal order operating at different levels. They stressed that merely because of the attainment of equal political and legal rights the 'women's question' had not been addressed fully. It is generally termed as second wave feminism.

It emerged partly because of dissatisfaction with the liberal/reformist feminist thought of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While as the first wave of feminism reposed faith in the betterment of women by extending them equal liberties, the second wave feminist thought centered around largely what may be called as the 'the man problem'. Through 'man problem' these feminists sought to explain women subjugation with the concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy is understood in an in a historical sense 'that men always have been, are, and always will be, motivated to dominate women and will employ both subtle and unsubtle means to exert their control'. These feminists consider men as the enemies of women and prescribe a separatist and autonomous route to unshackle the feminist movement from insidious effects of patriarchy. Liberal and socialist feminists took men along in their struggle for gender equality and justice; the former by demanding legal and political opportunities for women and later by seeking change in existing economic relationships between sexes in society. The active support of men is sought not only for pragmatic reasons – that is, because men have monopolized the political power – but partly because it would lead to the realization of a genuinely just and egalitarian society. Here men can claim to be feminist if they support gender equality. Unlike the earlier reformist feminists, they struggle for women liberation, not in partnership with egalitarian men but in opposition to them. Their objective is to make men redundant in women's lives.

The issue of whether to partner with men or not is a contested issue in the feminist theory. For radical feminists, the understanding of domination and power relationships should be located beyond the public sphere of politics into the realm of 'private' life of the family and the highly 'personalized' sphere of sexual relations. This notion of patriarchy's reach in every area of private life makes a battle against patriarchy all pervasive. So the phrases 'the personal is political' alludes to its all-pervasiveness and deep-rootedness. Therefore, they targeted conventional family and marriage and regarded it as a new site of women's oppression. They demanded more liberal abortion laws, legislations on marital rape and domestic violence, among other things.

Patriarchy is an analytical category used to describe 'conditions of inequality and disadvantage experienced by women in the public and private realms, i.e. as giving rise to gender discrimination.' In its broader sense, patriarchy is understood to be to be a social construction through the meanings given to masculinity and femininity. However, the concept of patriarchy is constantly in flux in the major feminist traditions. For instance, radical feminism made it a focal point for understanding the issue of gender, postmodern feminists even reject gender as a category and question the very meaning of 'woman'.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism emerged in the backdrop of anti-war and civil rights movements in the West and the growing consciousness in the developing world, among the coloured women. Focus had shifted from equal legal opportunities to sexuality and reproductive rights.

Theoretically, it was motivated by a cross-disciplinary approach and borrowed themes and interpretations from psychoanalysis, ecogism, identity politics, neo-Marxism. Feminists spoke of women as a social class and coined phrases such as "the personal are political" and "identity politics" in an effort to demonstrate that race, class, and gender oppression are all related. They initiated a concentrated effort to rid society top-to-bottom of sexism, from children's cartoons to the highest levels of government.

Simone de Beauvoir, an important link between first and second waves of feminism, in her *The Second Sex* (1972), expressed her dissatisfaction with the biological explanations of women's inferior status. She was equally disillusioned with Marxist and liberal views for their insufficient understanding of the woman problem. She argued that 'the project for a woman was the woman herself'. She insists upon the unique capacity that human beings enjoy for self-awareness and the ability they possess to make conscious choices to realize their existence. Since human beings have the unique capacity of self-awareness and capability to make conscious choices, so women, de Beauvoir argued, should comprehend their 'otherness' imposed on them by men whom they have unconsciously internalized as well. Women were exhorted to shun internalized sense of inferiority in the personal and social sphere. Underlining the social construction of womanhood she said 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman'. She, therefore, seeks support from feminists of all hues to expose the rationalization of the inequalities confronting women (**Beauvoir & Parshley, 1972**).

Marxist theory of feminism is the larger extension of Marxian interpretation of capitalist society and fundamental nature of economic relations. Accordingly, a history founded upon class struggle that culminates in a revolutionary transition to communist society has the potential to liberate women from disempowerment which is inescapable within capitalism. For Marx, rebuilding gender-based equality in the capitalist society was impossible. Marx attended to the issue of gender scantily because he had the conviction that after the realization of a classless society the secondary gender-based exploitation would disappear. Communism would ensure the chances of sexual equality as a logical consequence of 'human' freedom from oppressive class-based domination. Therefore, an independent human agency would flourish based on sexual egalitarianism only with the overthrow of capitalism by the class-conscious women and men.

With the overthrow of capitalism private property would become non-existent and with it would end 'the materialist motive for marriage which had enslaved women.' Marriages, which Marx and Engels didn't object, in socialism would be based on love and equality and not on exploitative foundations of capitalism. Similarly, Lenin, an advocate of equal rights for women, believed that women emancipation lied in their active and full participation in political and economic spheres. The socialist state in former USSR made efforts to allow women the greater opportunities to participate in political and economic activities by making public provisions for the household-based works hitherto undertaken by women, for example, public nursing. However, the Marxist feminist theories lost their glitter when the socialist states established in former USSR and other places could make any difference in the lives of women in a substantial way. Besides, Marxist/socialist framework treats all women as a class which is not the case. Even among women there are subjugated and the dominating. Besides, the economic prosperity of women cannot singularly assure the liberation of women given the all-pervasiveness of gender-based discrimination. Nevertheless, neo-Marxists tried to address the issue of gender in a more comprehensive way although at the cost of disbanding some core Marxist tenets.

Contemporary feminist thought has transcended ideological boundaries and easily criss-crosses and benefitting from other disciplines. Over the years, newer dimensions have emerged in the feminist theory which looks beyond the classic issues of justice, equality, thus broadening the horizon of feminism. New insights from cultural studies, literary theory, postmodern theories, psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies have opened up new areas of feminist contention in the recent times.

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