



The Feministic Vision for Reconstruction of Social Equality

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Abstract

In the history of human race, the role of woman has been wider and her contribution very significant. The Anthropological evidences show that the work of the early woman was tedious. It was only woman's food gathering but not man's hunting that sustained the humanity. All the tribal societies were centred around and organized through the mothers. But over a period of time the physical strength of males gained importance with the cultivation of land and planned husbandry, and women have been defined as economically dependent, as homemakers and consumers, but not as producers. The failure of societies to acknowledge women's contributions has not only undermined women's status, but denied their necessary resources. The present paper will discuss the position of woman, origin of feminism, and the feministic vision for reconstruction of social equality.

Keywords: Feminism, Women's Status, Homemaker, Origin of Feminism, Gender, Stereotypes, Gender, Perspective

Introduction

In the history of human race, the role of woman has been wider and her contribution is more significant. It is the labour of woman and her skills of biological aspects that helped the evolution of mankind. Since the female is bringing new humans from its body, the task of

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caring fall on woman. It is acknowledged thus: "Woman is the race itself, the strong primary sex, of man the biological after thought."¹

Throughout the history, women were confined to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men. As far as women are concerned, barring the developments of the last hundred years or so, social history has been a record of steady deterioration, and a rigid role together with the attribution of a second class status to women.

The Position of Woman

The anthropological evidences show that the work of the early woman was tedious. It was only woman's food gathering but not man's hunting that sustained the humanity in ancient society. All the tribal societies were centred around and organized through the mothers. When struggle for survival was the order of the day, woman enjoyed equal status with man. But the woman is nowhere in the written history of evolution, which only talks about man the hunter. It has been historically proved that women in the early societies were also subjected to violence of death; but they had a better chance of freedom, dignity and significance when compared to their state of life in the advanced societies.

For the primitive man, woman was the greatest entity of all, a goddess. There are a number of mythological stories which deal with the worship of the great goddess in different cultures all over the world, such as the goddesses we found in the villages of south India. The term 'matriarchy' is to be understood as a form of social organization which is woman centred and egalitarian, where woman carried all the activities along with man.

The physical strength of the males gained importance with the cultivation of land and planned husbandry with a decrease in the fertility of the soil. Men started moving in groups in search of other fertile lands. This migration resulted in wars between two groups and in these fighting, men displayed more muscle power and mobility than the women as they were encumbered with children.

¹ Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex*, London: Heinemann, 1971, p.34-35.

The skills of cultivation and the knowledge acquired by women became wasted due to the migration of the tribes.

The military organization of the tribe was in the hands of men. The clashes among tribes resulted in the formation of the society which included the winners or losers, dominant or submissive groups and women could not escape from the framework of society. It was a miracle to men as they could not understand the birth of a new life out of a woman's body. In the beginning, when the role of men in reproduction was felt to be normal women were revered as only they were capable of reproducing new life. At this moment, the pride of the male rose to challenge the female power and this was the beginning of the subjugation of women from all the activities of human life.

In the primitive societies all the natural occurrences were interpreted in symbolic and magical terms. But there was a change in the perception of man when he began to think for himself that the events which were once felt as divine were seen to be human. Thus, man confirmed his role in reproduction. Historian Jean Markdale states as follows:

When man began to assert that he was essential to fertilization, the old mental attitudes suddenly collapsed. This was a very important revolution in man's history, and it is astonishing that it is not rated equally with the wheel, agriculture, and the use of metals [...]. As the male had been cheated for centuries [...] equality was not enough. He now understood the full implications of his power and was going to dominate.²

With the establishment of settled life and discovery of agriculture, the structure of human society required a system and administration. Man became the master and secured the ownership of the State. As societies evolved, male control through brutal force was gradually supplemented by the rule of law. Women's rights and privileges were attacked at various levels. The woman is not what a man is. For example, Aristotle, the Greek Philosopher of the 4th Century B.C said that man is active and the

² Jean Markdale, *Women of the Cells*, New York: Crossing Press, 1982, p.14.

woman is passive. The position of women is even more worsened through the writings of many politicians and historians.

In the view of Xenophon "women were created by God for indoor functions and man for all others."³ The role of woman was decimated to mere childbearing, resulting in degenerating further her position. The new social systems deprived them of freedom. Since woman had lost the basic right to control over her own body and had become the property of man. There are a number of written records, Epics, chronicles, anthropological and archaeological evidences that women were traded, subjected to slavery, killed on the death of her husband and in every way abused at will, finally becoming an object of sacrifice.

Traditionally, male behaviour has been considered the norm, and women have been viewed to some degree as inferior. As a whole, women and men alike have accepted the fact that men have rights that women do not have. These attitudes are part of the stereotypes that shape the thinking about women and women's behaviour.

Some of these stereotypes stem from women's childbearing, which, since it often was accompanied by poor nutrition, was debilitating. Nursing and child rearing have restricted women's activities. Childbearing alone, however, does not fully explain the pervasiveness of women's secondary status. Whatever the sources, stereotypes and the attitudes they reflect are effective barriers to the changing of women's status. For this reason, many feminists have sought to identify and confront some of the more hurtful stereotypes.

Women have been defined as economically dependent, as homemakers and consumers, but not as producers. However, records show that women have always had economic roles. As farmers, fabricators, and service providers, they have contributed to both household and market. The failure of societies to acknowledge women's contributions has not only undermined women's status, but denied their necessary resources.

³ Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women through Time*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992, p.20.

In medieval Europe, women were denied the right to own property, to study or to participate in public life. Even as late as the early 20th Century, women in the United States, Europe and in Asia could neither vote nor hold elective office. Women were prevented from conducting business with a male representative, be it father, brother, husband, legal agent, or even son. Married women could not exercise control over their own children without the permission of their husbands. Moreover, women had little or no access to education and were barred from most professions.

Origin of Feminism

Feminism originated largely in the West, but manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions those committed to women's rights and interests. Feminism is the belief in the social, economic and political equality of the sexes. This sense that the dignity of woman's work has never been wholly acknowledged inspires such remarks as that of Miss Margery Fry during the discussions on the Oxford statute which limited the number of women undergraduates: "Women do their best work when they are allowed to do it, not as women, but as human beings".⁴

It is the urge behind woman's growing demand for employment handicapped by inadequate pay or unnecessary restrictions as whether she is married or whether her husband has an income. The right to separate her public and private affairs as every man is allowed to separate his is no 'minor grievance', but the test of a fundamental distinction the distinction between a social and an independent responsible individual.

Thus, the issue behind the suffrage movement and behind the subsequent agitations over equal rights of women is, and always has been the same. It is not so much a demand for the vote, which in itself might well be described as a minor grievance rather than as a grand old cause, but a demand for a satisfactory answer to the fundamental question: 'Should a woman be treated as a human

⁴ P. Berry and A. Bishop, eds. *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain & Winifred Holby*, London: Virago, 1985, p. 40.

being, and if not, why not?' Woman herself, long conscious of complete humanity, today desires only that others shall recognize it and honestly accept the implications of such recognition.

The first wave of feminism which has been so admirably dated is usually dated in both Britain and the United States, from the middle of the 19th Century.⁵ The concerns of this period in feminism's history are generally assumed to be the aspiration for emancipation. Women are looked as from dependent subordinate and civil status and their incorporation into the modern industrial status as citizens on the same terms as men.

From Mary Wollstonecraft onwards, middle class feminists and men such as J.S.Mill and Engels who have been associated, in one way or another, with the feminist project; and they have argued for the right of women to be free and independent. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* concluded with passages invoking the ideal life for women as that of the single, urban woman with a professional job.⁶

The women's protests against male dominated culture are traced back to the 17th Century, though it is not the beginning of feminism. The growth of early capitalism and new ideas of reason and science, led people to see various question's in a new light. These forces also caused doubts to be expressed about the nature of the relationship between men and women. There were basic changes in commodity production and they began to affect the position of women in the structure of work and in society.

Changes in industrial organization affected women's position in the structure of work. In the guild, their position was progressively weakened with every new refinement in the process of labour; women were allocated either a powerless place or a place where they were more severely exploited. The industrial revolution affected middle and upper class woman in a different way. The shift of productive activity from home to factory led to a realization

⁵ Mary Evans, ed., *The Woman Question*, London: Sage Publications, 1994, p. 6.

⁶ Mary Evans, ed., *The Woman Question*, p. 8.

of their economic uselessness, thus incurring loss of self-respect on the part of middle class women.

Yet, with the growing prosperity of the middle classes, the upper middle class women were freed from the drudgery of household work. Thus, side by side with the hard-working, dehumanized women of the working class, there appeared the new ideal of a housewife or lady of leisure. The idle and parasitic life that these women had to lead created a sense of futility of feminine existence in these upper middle class women. This sense of vicinity, along with advances in women's education in this class, motivated a social unrest usually called the emancipation of women.

Different groups of women were affected in quite distinct ways. Rather than a unifying feminist consciousness, there were differentiation of interests and expectations. As Rowbotham has put it, "The feminism of this stage was still aspiration, an idea amongst a small group of women; it had no possibility as a movement."⁷

In the 18th Century food riots, the traditional manner in which the poor tried to re-assert a pre-capitalist moral economy, which placed need before profit, and the old community against the new state. Women figured prominently in the food riots, which show the close connections of women to consumption. Within this new narrow necessity, few women had the leisure to think about masculine superiority. Their men's relationship to them, too, did not evince this superiority, except in their physical strength.

Ethel Snowden noted in 1913 that the roots of the modern feminist movement lie in the loss of work by women. The founders of the movement were women of the educated middle class with only one or two women of aristocratic connections.

After more than sixty years of strenuous agitation, the movement included women of every class and condition. The busy working wife with her limited means, her large broad, her vision limited by the harassing worries of her

⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, London: The Penguin Press, 1972, p. 34.

life, feels little sympathy with the feminist whose gospel she has never understood.⁸

The cumulative effects of the transition from Catholic to Protestantism and from feudalism to capitalism led to two major developments. Work and home were separated; morality was confined to the home, and there were fewer strictures on the behaviour of man outside the home. The genesis of the contemporary family and the rise of the women's movements can thus be traced to the interlocking and overlapping histories of the capitalist mode of production and the protestant forms of patriarchal ideology.

Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the poor women faced quite a different situation. By the time of the industrial revolution, there were vast multitudes of people employed in agriculture or manufacture and totally dependent on the wages, and the labour of individual family members. Women of the bourgeoisie were cut off from the production process, while the women of the labouring class were burdened with toil at home and work outside. The rising capitalist production mode produced what is called 'two nations' of women bourgeoisie women and labouring class women.

In this context Sheila Rowbotham points out two possible interpretations, the ideal and the historical. The first is a conception of a society where in the roles of the dominator and the dominated are reversed, and women take over the superior status. This feminism is utopian and exists in the realism of stories and visions. It is not a political movement. Feminism in the second sense is more sedate; it envisages the need to compete more fairly with men and is expressed in the struggle for equal rights. It would be worthwhile here to show which of the two are preferred by the writer. It is possible to trace two phases: the emergence of the religious and moral idea of the individual worth and dignity of women, at the movement for specific reforms legal and educational, and the right to vote etc.

⁸ Ethel Snowden, *The Feminist Movement*, London: Collins Clear Type Press, 1913, p. 38.

The traditional roles of women as housewives and men as breadwinners led to marriage and family patterns that were basic in perpetually inferior treatment of women. It is only now, in our current times, that women are being encouraged to engage in work outside the home, whereas men are being urged to participate equally in childcare and housework.

Historically, one can identify quite distinct tendencies in feminism. In England and the US, the longest tradition is that of democratic liberal feminism directed towards obtaining equal rights and opportunities for women. In the 19th Century, the focus was on removing educational and professional barriers. The impetus behind these reforming campaigns was often militant. This equal right's militancy culminated in the violent struggles of the early 20th Century suffragettes in their fight for the vote.

The British legislation for equal pay and the sex discrimination legislations of the US are landmark victories for 'equal rights' of feminism. There have been other reforms also in social policy and employment. Another dominant tradition in feminism is more separatist, more than often feminist utopias operate by dispelling the violent, militaristic, hierarchical, authoritarian characteristics of men. This feminist thought inclines to pessimism on the question of ameliorating male brutality. It stands for female communities and the strengthening of women's relationships to each other. Rosaland Miles writes:

Women are born free and her rights are the same as those of a man. The law must be an expression of the general will; all citizens, men and women alike, must participate in making it must be the same for all [...]. All citizens must be equally eligible for all public offices, positions and jobs, according to their capacity and without any other criteria than those their virtues and talents.⁹

The root cause of all economic and social problems was the lack of education; and this gave men a reason for refusing political rights to women. Olympe de Gouges raised her voice and asked women

⁹ Rosaland Miles, *The Women's History of the World*, London: Paladin, 1989, p. 183.

to fight for the recognition of their rights. She was critical about women joining the Revolution as it may not bring out the desired change in their position. Though the lives of these pioneer feminists of France met with a tragic end, they succeeded in generating a political consciousness in women. The Revolutionary Republican women, the most active wing of de Maricourt's women's clubs demanded the right to vote for women, when women were excluded from the universal human suffrage. But Robespierre and his Jacobins drove women, out of politics and suppressed all the political organization of women.

The Feministic Perspective

Feminism, like most broad based philosophical perspectives, accommodates several species under its genus. No short list could be exhaustive. Feminist theorists are able to identify their approach as essentially Liberal, Marxist, Psychoanalysis, Socialist, Existentialist and Post Modern. Each of these is a partial and provisional answer for the woman question, providing the unique perspectives with its own methodological strengths and weaknesses. What continues to fascinate, is the way in which these partial and provisional answers intersect. Joining together both to lament the ways in which, women have been oppressed, repressed, and suppressed, and to celebrate the ways in which so many women have beaten the system taken charge of their own destinies, and encouraged each other to live, love, laugh and be happy as women.¹⁰

Much of contemporary feminist theory defines itself in reaction against tradition. Liberalism is the obvious place to begin and survey of feminist thought. This perspective received its classic formulation in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and in John Stuart Mills *The Subjection of Women* its main thrust, is that female subordination is rooted in set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance and or success in the so called public world. It has been aptly noted as follows:

¹⁰ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought :A Comprehensive Introduction*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

Because society has the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and / or physically less capable than men, it excludes women from the academy, the forum and the market place. As a result of this policy of exclusion, the true potential of many women goes unfulfilled [...] gender justice, insist Liberal Feminists, and requires us, first, to make the rules of the game fair.¹¹

Radical Feminists believe that neither their liberal, nor their Marxist sisters have gone far enough. They think the patriarchal system that oppresses women, a system characterized by power, dominate, and competition, a system that cannot be reformed but only ripped out roof and branch. It is not just legal and political structures that must be over turned; its social and cultural institutions, especially the family, the church and the academy- must also go.

It is important to distinguish the feminist inquiry from the anti-feminist dictum that biology is women's nature and unchanging destiny. When the conservatives say that biology is destiny they mean that people are born with hormones, anatomy and chromosomes of either a male or a female. Females are destined to have much more of a reproductive burdens one than males. Males will, other things being equally exhibit masculine psychological traits like assertiveness, aggressiveness, hardiness, nationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically, and have the ability to control emotion. Other things being equal, females will, exhibit 'feminine' psychological traits like gentleness, modesty, humility, supportiveness, empathy, compassion, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, usefulness. Society should preserve this natural order.

In contrast to conservations, Radical Feminists have no interest in preserving the kind of 'Natural Order' or biological status that subordinates women to men; rather their aim is to question the concept of the so called natural order; and to overcome whatever the negative effects the biology has had on women and men. Most Radical Feminists came to view women's biology, especially their

¹¹ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, p. 2.

reproductive capacities, and the nurturing psychology that follows from it as potential sources of liberating power for women.

The Feministic vision for reconstruction of social equality

Woman's status and function in all of these structures must change if she is to achieve anything approximating full liberation. Furthermore, women's interior work or her psyche must also be transferred for without such a change improvements in her exterior world will not liberate her from the kind of patriarchal thoughts that undermine her confidence, as emphasized by Existential feminists.¹²

Feminity should be no longer being understood as those traits that deviate from masculinity. On the contrary, femininity should be understood as a way of being that needs no external reference permit. Some other anti-androgynies, reverting back to native theory, argued that despite patriarchy's imposition upon all women of what amounts to a false or inauthentic feminine nature, many women have nevertheless rebelled. A true or authentic female nature, full personal freedom for women consists where ability to renounce her false feminine nature in favour of her true female self.

De Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* argued that woman is the other because she is not man. Man is the self, the free, determining being who defines the meaning of his existence, and woman is the other the object whose meaning is determined for her. If woman is to become a self, a subject, she must, like man, transferred the definition, labels and essence limiting her existence, she must make herself be whatever she wants to be.

The vast majority of illiterate families whom past as well as present values remained in accessible have remained unchanged. They lived on whatever was available to them through blind and mechanical transmission of culture. Without the spread of education it is difficult to expand the feminine perspective behind social changes and issues, and it is not possible to develop newer such perspectives.

¹² Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, p. 6.

While the modern values in the existing society ask in many ways improvements upon their preceding stages, it cannot be said that the present condition is totally satisfying. Many of the difficulties in the life of a woman persist unchanged even today, whereas the contact with the West has brought in welcome changes in men's perspective, it has also brought in ideas which need attention before they can be experimented within society. Feminists consider that major problems within mainstream western social and political thought lies in its inclination to universalize experiences associated with a man, which is to represent men's experiences associated with men, as describing that which is common to all human beings. Feminists consider that gender difference actually shapes the intellectual geography of our social and political life. It shapes what we can think and how we can think it. Moreover feminists argue that mainstream political thought offers a conceptual scheme in which viewpoints associated with men are taken as the views, the standard or rational sensible and universally applicable view.

Conclusion

Feminist theory provides a basis for understanding every area of women's life, and a feminist perspective can affect the world politically, culturally, economically, and spiritually. The initial tenants of feminism have already been established the idea that power is based on gender differences and that men's illegitimate power over women taints all aspects of society. It is good of that traditional stereotypes are being questioned, and women themselves are showing increasing assertiveness. For laws to be effective, people's minds and social attitudes have to be changed. This seems to be an exceedingly slow process and can be hastened only by fuller understanding and consistent effort.

Currently a critical aspect of feminism's content appears to be that it is spoken by women. Feminism is increasingly understood by feminists as a way of thinking created by for and on behalf of women, as gender specific. Women are its subjects, its creators of its theory, of its practice and of its language. Freedom of spirit of action can come only by recognizing and being oneself, not by imitation of another and even less by bowing to the accepted but outdated ideas of superiority inferiority, either of the sexes or of

aptitudes and attitudes. Let the individual woman find what is relevant to her own personality and life.

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