
Origin and Development of Feminism in Historical Perspectives

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***Abstract:** It is widely known to all that excepting Rig-Vedic period, the fifty percent population of our society i.e. women are started exploiting by the male centric selfish dominating society since long past. The gradual exploitation of women in terms of disallowing them from proper education, socio-economic and political sphere of life century after century created vacuum and strong hindrance towards the all round development of society. Keeping in mind the above circumstantial experiences, those who are organizing movements for ameliorating their condition and at the same time advocating the rights, dignity, honour and empowerment of women as a whole is came to be known as feminist movement. The feminist activists are working mainly about the right of pregnancy, stop domestic violence, maternity leave, equal salary for equal work, and for ending sexual harassment and persecution. A good number of modern feminist thought that the feminism is nothing but a grass-root level movement which crosses the social-class, caste, religion, culture and thereafter extended itself. Actually, the ultimate goal of feminism is to protect and extend the rights of women in the all sphere of life.*

***Keywords:** Amelioration, Dignity, Exploitation, Empowerment, Feminist, Patriarchy, Sexism.*

Date of Submission: 25-12-2021

Date of Acceptance: 07-01-2022

Introduction

As a result of long standing patriarchal dominating society, the women throughout the world were exploited since long past. In spite of giving full labour with great sincerity and devotion, the women were usually subjected to face inhuman experiences from the male regulated society that prompted some very rational as well as unbiased human being to raise their voices for women empowerment in the form of ensuring equality between men and women in the society. Actually, the ultimate goal of feminism is to protect and extend the rights of women in the all sphere of life. It is an intellectual commitment that seeks justice for women. The feminist activists are working mainly about the right of pregnancy, stop domestic violence, maternity leave, equal salary for equal work, and for ending sexual harassment and persecution. A good number of modern feminist thought that the feminism is nothing but a grass-root level movement which crosses the social-class, caste, religion, culture and thereafter extended itself.

Position of Women in Rig-Vedic Period (1500 B.C. - 1000 B.C)

As per historical evidence the Rig-Veda is considered as the oldest literary script as well as very foundation of an ideal social structure in which women could enjoy respectable position. In the early Vedic tradition there is immense evidence that women were generally allowed to share a great deal of equality with their male counterpart. They could receive an education in religious doctrine and permitted to practice the same. Many of them were even devoted themselves to study and teaching. The women were also actively participated in socio-religious, economic and political sphere of life along with the men. They had the freedom and right to choose their life partner. The *Rig Veda* provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of women and men to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge. In that context the name of *Apala*, *Ghosha*, *Biswavara*, *Lopamudra*, *Mamata* and some important female deities including *Usha* and *Vak* are noteworthy.

In that context, it will not be exaggerated if one argues that for what the feminists are fighting today, everything were very much prevalent in the Rig-Vedic society (1500-1000 B.C.).

Commencement of the Deteriorating of the Position of Women

It has already been stated that in Vedic times, particularly during the Rig-Vedic period women were allow to participate in religious rituals, become educated and marry at an older age. After the early Vedic period particularly from the time of the later Vedic period (1000 B.C. – 600

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B.C.) status of women started deteriorating and in some way or other dominance of the male people increased day by day. Their status “systematically deteriorated” so by the time of the Epics. It is evident that women were not appreciated or treated as equal as to men in the same way. For example - The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Laws of Manu* propagate the ideal of “loyal and obedient wives whose only goal in life is to please their husbands”.

Institutionalization of Patriarchy

It is noteworthy that the ‘systematic declining’ of the position of women gradually started becoming a way of social life as well as norms of the society. Repeat of norms again and again becomes stabilize. Stabilization of norms comes through continuous practice in the patriarchal society. The word ‘patriarchy’ is derived from the term ‘patriarch’; it denotes a family having a male head, who dominates children, wife, young men of the family and slaves. It prefers a male child rather than a female child. Patriarchy is, in major sense, connected with property and inheritance. Patriarchy is defended greatly by mythological stories; literatures etc. and different fragmented experiences such as unequal distribution of food, household works, lack of education, fixed mobility for female children - distinctly mark the subordination and control of women by men. As per the observation of X. P. Mao, ‘patriarchy is nothing but a male centric selfish dominating society’. This patriarchal domination ascribed upon the society in such a way that the women and *Sudras* were not allowed to read and hear Vedas in India. Not only that in the early 20th century in Europe, women were not allowed to university study.

The position as well as status of women throughout the world were in fact so deteriorated that excepting the name of *Sultana Razia* (1236-1240 A.D.) in the history of medieval India, there was hardly mention worthy any name of woman with dignity and honour in the pages of history prior to the commencement of the feminist movement nay feminism (1830s). Therefore, if we think according to the line of Swami Vivekananda as observed by Raghunath Ghosh, ‘our society runs with two wings like a bird flying in the sky i.e. male and female. If one wing somehow becomes weak or cut down, another wing will not be able to operate’. However, as we know the 50% population of the world are belong to women and they were exploited in the name of sexism since long days. In spite of giving full labour with great sincerity and devotion they (women) were gone through inhuman experiences that prompted some very rational as well as unbiased human being to sexism to organize a movement for

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ameliorating their condition and at the same time advocating the rights, dignity, honour and empowerment of women as a whole is came to be known as feminist movement.

What is Feminism?

The terms 'feminism' or 'feminist' were first appeared in French in 1830s, Netherlands in 1870s, Great Britain in 1890s, and the United States in 1910s. Feminism is an intellectual commitment that seeks justice for women. Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression. Feminism is not a static notion. It evolves throughout our lives and is shaped by the various lenses. The subjugation or subordination of woman is a central fact of history and it is the main cause of all psychological disorders in society.

In fact, feminism is nothing but a synthesis of social theory, political movement and moral philosophy. The feminism is the full of experience of women and that experiences must be related with social, political and of course economy. Actually, the ultimate goal of feminism is to protect and extend the rights of women in each and every sphere of life. Though, first of all it was the matter of discussion within the periphery of literature but later on it has occupied the place in the stage of cinema and novel. It has also penetrated in the discussion of social as well as political theory in the twentieth century.

Gender Discrimination and Feminism

Giving emphasis on Gender discrimination, some feminists would like to establish the fact that out of which the womenfolk has to suffer various injustices in the patriarchal society which is prevalent in our country as well as across the world since long back. Simone De Beauvoir, a noted feminist describes a history of women's treatment in society. She begins the ways in which societies mistreated women and regarded them as inferior to men. She then explains how the advent of private property pushed men to institutionalize their oppression on women, who started regarding as property as well. She also pointed out that 'traditional systems of oppression continue to this day in the spheres of reproduction, sexuality, and labour'. Keeping in mind the above circumstantial experiences, the feminists are in favour of increasing the dignity of women and women representation in politics. They also thought that the concept of 'Gender' (though,

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‘Sex’ is natural), the distinctions between ‘Men’ and ‘Women’ are not determined by birth or nature, rather it is habituated and fabricated by the society. So, the femininity of women is not natural, it is artificially created by the society. In case of determination of societal relation the feminists are looking for alternative model. The feminist political activists are working mainly about the right of pregnancy, stop domestic violence, maternity leave, equal salary for equal work, and for ending sexual harassment and persecution.

Age of Enlightenment and Feminism

Whatever we understand about the term ‘Feminist philosophy or movement’ in modern sense, that actually has been started at the age of ‘Enlightenment’ i.e. during the period of the last phase of 15th century to 16th century. This time the intellectuals like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Marquis de Condorcet etc. started fighting for the equal rights of women and people of all races. It was out of their effort the ‘First Scientific Society for Women’ was established at Middleberg in 1785. A famous writing about the rights of women titled ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Women’ by Mary Wellstone Craft was published in 1785.

Organized Form of Feminism

Under the caption of ‘organized form of feminism’ it is found that there were three waves of feminism and let us be brief in discussing those.

- i. **First Wave (1830s):** The main issues were abolition of slavery (1833). Women’s Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls and the 19th Amendment guaranteed the women right to vote.
- ii. **Second Wave (1966-1979):** The main issues were antidiscrimination policies and equal privileges. There was heightened feminist consciousness. The movement was linked to the Civil Rights movement begun in the late 50’s. Three classics in the 2nd wave Feminism were as follows:
 - Simone De Beauvoir’s *The second Sex* (1949)
 - Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)
 - Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982)
- iii. **Third Wave:** What characterizes the third wave? It is inclusive, eclectic, beyond thinking in dualities.

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Keeping in mind the above context it is found that in nineteenth century- the feminist movement took its shape as an organised one. The origin of the movement was laid within the liberal movement as well as reformation movement of 19th century. Charles Fourier, the utopian socialist, first coined the term 'Feminism' in 1837. The book titled 'The Subjugation of Women' by John Stuart Mill was published in 1869.

Voting rights were given to women in the various countries in the first half of the 20th century. Though, there were various reasons in different countries behind the sanctioning of voting rights to womenfolk, but giving voting rights during the time of war became as if a common reason.

Views of Engels and Feminism

Frederick Engels in his famous book titled 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' (1984) categorically stated that from the time of immemorial there is a common conception that the first and foremost duties of a woman is to give the birth of children, look after them and performing all household activities. Moreover, there is also a traditional belief that the women are weaker than man as a rule of nature. So, the women are inferior to men and this concept started gathering into the mind from the family life. It is the families which educate that women life should be devoted for the sake of men. Engels thought that the family is the primary unit of the society where the exploitation as well as deprivation of women has been started first. The authority of men upon women also initiated from the family. Nobody before Engels said about the exploitation of women within the family. The modern feminists also enthusiastically welcomed these statements of Engels.

According to Engels, when there was joint family, women were considered as the property of whole family. In the later time with the advent of Capitalism, when joint families started breaking and husband-wife centric nuclear families grown up then the periphery of the authority of the master of the family certainly reduced but the position as well as status of women were not changed at all. Not only that with the commencement of the patriarchal society nay families, in the case of successor of wealth of family the women stated losing their importance.

The writings of Engels brought momentum in the feminist movement. From the very fag end of the 19th century to the first three decades of the early 20th century, the main focus of the women movements were to acquire voting rights and freeing women from the exploitation of the

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state. The women were given voting rights in England and America in 1918 and 1920 respectively. The processes of obtaining voting right for women were completed within 1930. After obtaining voting rights, the women were able to get a platform for expressing their views and thereby they got an opportunity to unite themselves. Thereafter, several writings related to the rights of women started publishing. For example, the book titled '*A Room of One's Own*' by Virginia Woolf was published in 1929. She wrote about the personal world of the women and their consciousness about their rights and duties. In her writing there is clear indication against the tendency of the male domination, establishment of the authority of the male, war like mentality and also included male controlled capitalism. The very peace loving woman writers like Virginia Woolf would believe that in order to bring peace, there must be a change in the male dominated value consciousness in the society. The professions like *Purohitas, Jajakas, Social Theorists, Journalists, Authors* etc. were primarily controlled by the male due to the advantage of their sex. It is the conviction of Woolf that only education can be the way of advancement of the women in each and every sphere of the society; therefore she gave considerable importance to the women education. It is Virginia Woolf who said that, the gender identification of women is not given by nature; it has been created by the society.

It is noteworthy that the Feminism or Feminist theory that had developed in the late 1960s or 70s were mainly centered on the problems of white middle class women of the western countries, though they claimed as the representatives of entire women societies. Countering the above claim, in the later times some feminists wanted to say that the term 'woman' does not mean that the group of equal interest as well as same mentality. A good number of modern feminist thought that the feminism is nothing but a grass-root level movement which crosses the social-class, caste, religion, culture and thereafter extended itself.

Marriage and Feminism

Simone-de-Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) were two shining example of feminist movement. Both of them used to think that the strongest weapon to establish the authority upon women of the patriarchal society is the institution named marriage. As they had no belief in the institutional marriage system, so they used to live together throughout the life without marriage. Up to the year of 1949, Simone-de-Beauvoir was known as a socialist, but with the publication of her famous book titled '*The Second Sex*, in 1949, she came to be known

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as feminist as well as feminist writer. In the year of 1960 Beauvoir clearly realized that those people who are think about the all round development of women in the society are feminist. She had another observation that the environment of the society is not favorable to women and these unfavorable environments have to be changed into favorable one for women. She also said that, 'Nobody is born as a woman, but some become woman'.

Politics of Patriarchy and Feminism

'Sexual Politics (1970)', a Ph. D. dissertation of an American writer and activist named Kate Millett, is considered as a very important milestone about the writings of feminism. It is regarded as a classic of feminism and one of radical feminism's key texts. The main essence of the book is that - the two important basis of patriarchy are cruelty and intend to establish authority. The women have no any separate existence. She is the companion of men and would glorify as and when her male counterpart would be glorified. According to her the focal tactics of the gender base politics is disallow women to study particularly higher study, to earn money so that they could confine within the household activities for the pleasure of the home as a whole. She said that this type of house arrest environment of women came through the institutional relation named marriage. On the basis of inequality and establishing authority led to the creation of an ideal of usurping which helps to exist patriarchy.

Marxism and Feminism

Many people thought that the relation between Marxism and Feminism are as if against each other. According to Marx, the relation of production is the root of all relations of the society. Marx told this as a materialistic relation. Later on other relations came in to being by centering the materialistic relation which is known as non-materialistic relation. Although, scholars like Heartman, Young etc. accepted the main theory of Marx, but they propounded a new theory also. According to them the exploitation and deprivation of women started from main two things i.e. economy and patriarchy. Marx acknowledged the exploitation of women from economic point of view not from patriarchal point of view. According to Heartman, patriarchy is separated from Marxist economy and that patriarchy is created out of labor of women and exploitation of womanhood, but Marx remained silent about this.

According to Michel, the exploitation and deprivation of women not only broke out due to production system but also patriarchy which gave men superiority, power of controlling the

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society from where women exploitation came up. According to Young, it is not historical that patriarchy is the conjunction of capitalism, because patriarchy is standing on gender inequality whose root base is male vs. female. It is through the capitalism, the rights of women were forfeited from the production and the household life of women has been described as woman life. According to Marx, the proletariats' are the destructive class; but the feminists thought that in all the developed capitalist society the women would be emerged as the revolutionary class, who will dethroned the patriarchal society and be able to establish a society where men and women enjoy equal rights and freedom. That would be the victory of feminism.

Conclusion

Finally, it may be said that as a result of feminist movement throughout the world some inhuman practices on the women undoubtedly abolished. The women have gotten many rights and also started enjoying many more facilities which were predominantly under the male control since century after century. In spite of that genuine equality between the sexes has not yet been established in the society. Many more traditional value systems like marriage, reproduction, femininity etc. are still prevalent in the society. Therefore, understanding the utility as well as vitality of the women in case of making a happy and beautiful family-society-country or globe, if the women are allowed to enjoy equal opportunities they will certainly be able to achieve just as much as men can. One thing we should remember that first of all we are all human, therefore some are male or female. So, 'treat women as a human being', give them proper dignity and respect and enjoy beautiful life around you.

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