

## **Feminist Movement and It's Scopes : An Empirical Study**

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### *“Yatra Nrajestu Pujyate Tatra Ramyanti Devata”*

Feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal to define, establish, and achieve political, economical, cultural, personal and social status of women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. Feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to fair wages or equal, to own property, to education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to promote bodily autonomy and integrity, and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Feminist campaigns are generally considered to be one of the main forces behind major historical societal changes for women's rights, particularly in the West, where they are near universally credited with having achieved women suffrage, gender neutrality in English, reproductive rights for women (including access to contraceptives and abortion), and the right to enter into contracts and own property, some feminists, including Bell hooks, argue for the inclusion women's within its aims because men are also harmed by traditional gender roles. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience, it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of gender. Feminism Charles Fourier, a Utopian Socialist and French philosopher, is credited with having coined the word 'féminisme' in 1837 The words 'féminisme' (feminism) and 'féminist' (feminist) first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872, Great Britain in the 1890 and the United States in 1910, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 1852. Feminists around the world have had different causes and goals. Most western feminist historians assert that all movements that work to obtain women's rights should be considered feminist movements.

The history of the modern western feminist movements is divided into three waves. Each wave dealt with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave comprised women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, promoting women's right to vote. The second wave was associated with the ideas and actions of the women's liberation. Feminist theory is the extension of

feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It encompasses work in a variety of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art, history, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. While providing a critique of these social and political relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests.

In the field of literary criticism, Elaine Showalter describes the development of feminist theory as having three phases. The first she calls *feminist critique*, in which the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena. The second Showalter calls *gynocriticism*, in which the woman is producer of textual meaning. The last phase she calls *gender theory*. Some branches of feminism closely track the political leanings of the larger society, such as liberalism and conservatism, or focus on the environment. Liberal feminism seeks individualistic equality of men and women through political and legal reform without altering the structure of society. Radical feminism considers the male-controlled capitalist hierarchy as the defining feature of women's oppression and the total uprooting and reconstruction of society as necessary. Conservative feminism is conservative relative to the society in which it resides. Libertarian feminism conceives of people as self-owners and therefore as entitled to freedom from coercive interference. Separatist feminism does not support heterosexual relationships. Lesbian feminism is thus closely related.

The feminist movement produced both feminist fiction and non-fiction, and created new interest in women's writing. It also prompted a general re-evaluation of women's historical and academic contributions in response to the belief that women's lives and contributions have been under represented as areas of scholarly interest. Much of the early period of feminist literary scholarship was given over to the rediscovery and reclamation of texts written by women. Studies like Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) and Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) were ground breaking in their insistence that women have always been writing. Commensurate with this growth in scholarly interest, various presses began the task of reissuing long out of print texts. Virago Press began to publish its large list of 19th and early 20th century novels in 1975 and became one of the first commercial presses to join in the project of reclamation. In the 1980 Pandora Press, responsible for publishing Spender's study, issued a companion line of 18th century novels written by women. More recently, Broadview Press continues to issue 18th and 19th century novels, many hitherto out of print, and the University of

Kentucky has a series of re-publications of early women's novels. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, is noted in its argument for both a literal and figural space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by patriarchy.

The widespread interest in women's writing is related to a general reassessment and expansion of the literary canon. Interest in post-colonial literatures, gay and lesbian literature, writing by people of colour, working people's writing, and the cultural productions of other historically marginalised groups has resulted in a whole scale expansion of what is considered *literature*, and genres hitherto not regarded as *literary*, such as children's writing, journals, letters, travel writing, and many others are now the subjects of scholarly interest. Most genres and subgenres have undergone a similar analysis, so that one now sees work on the *female gothic* or women's science fiction. According to Elyce Rae Helford, 'Science fiction and fantasy serve as important vehicles for feminist thought, particularly as bridges between theory and practice'. Feminist science fiction is sometimes taught at the university level to explore the role of social constructs in understanding gender. Notable texts of this kind are Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1970), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

Women's role in Pre-colonial social structures reveals that feminism was theorised differently in India than in the West. In India, women's issues first began to be addressed when the state commissioned a report on the status of women to a group of feminist researchers and activists. The report recognised the fact that in India, women were oppressed under a system of structural hierarchies and injustices. During this period, Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates being conducted about violence against women. However, due to the difference in the historical and social culture of India, the debate in favor of Indian women had to be conducted creatively and certain Western ideas had to be rejected. Women's issues began to gain an international prominence when the decade of 1975–1985 was declared the United Nations Decade for Women.

Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures, age, and ordinal status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes. Patriarchal attributes include dowry, siring sons etc. kinship, caste, community,

village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nair's of Kerala, Shetty's of Mangalore, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies. In these communities, the head of the family is the oldest woman rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender neutral. There are so many communities in India which has matriarchal and matrilineal, communities. There are Tribal communities who have been belief on matriarchal and matrilineal society. In Muslim families, women and men are considered equal, but not in the westernised sense. The *Quran* teaches that the minds of males and females work differently and are generally different biologically. Therefore, Islam grants different rights to the husband and wife. One such right which the wife owes to her husband is being head of the household.

The heterogeneity of the Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies, contributing to the existence of multiple feminisms. Hence, feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women, and women as a group. The widely used definition is An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation. The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. There have been intense debates within the Indian women's movements about the relationship between Western and Indian feminisms. Many Indian feminists simultaneously claim a specific 'Indian sensitivity' as well as an international feminist cohesion with groups and individuals worldwide. The rise of liberal feminism in the West in the 1970 focused deeply on demands for equal opportunities in education and employment, as well as ending violence against women. To a large extent, the emerging feminist movement in India was influenced by Western ideals. These called for education and equal rights, but also adapted their appeals to local issues and concerns, such as dowry related violence against women, Sati, Sex selective abortion and custodia. Unlike the Western feminist movement, India's movement was initiated by men, and later joined by women. The efforts of these men included abolishing sati, which was a widow's death by burning on her husband's funeral pyre, abolishing the custom of child marriage, abolishing the disfiguring of widows, introducing the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows, promoting women's education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property, and requiring the law to acknowledge women's status by granting them basic rights in matters such as adoption.

The 19th century was the period that saw a majority of women's issues come under the spotlight and reforms began to be made. Much of the early reforms for Indian women were conducted by men. However, by the late 19th century they were joined in their efforts by their wives, sisters, daughters, proteges and other individuals directly affected by campaigns such as those carried out for women's education. By the late 20th century, women gained greater autonomy through the formation of independent women's own organisations. By the late thirties and forties a new narrative began to be constructed regarding '*women's activism*'. This was newly researched and expanded with the vision to create 'logical' and organic links between feminism and Marxism, as well as with anti-communalism and anti-casteism, etc. The Constitution of India did guarantee 'equality between the sexes,' which created a relative lull in women's movements until the 1970. The late nineteenth century, as nationalist movements emerged in India. These movements resisted 'colonial interventions in gender relations' particularly in the areas of family relations. In the mid to late nineteenth century, there was a national form of resistance to any colonial efforts made to 'modernise' the Hindu family. This included the Age of Consent controversy that erupted after the government tried to rise the age of marriage for women. During this period the struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Claiming Indian superiority became the tool of cultural revivalism resulting in an essentialising model of Indian womanhood similar to that of Victorian womanhood special yet separated from public space. Gandhi legitimised and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. He exalted their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance; and carved a niche for those in the public arena. Peasant women played an important role in the rural satyagrahas of Borsad and Bardoli. Women-only organisations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with issues relating to the scope of women's political participation, women's franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties.

The 1920 was a new era for Indian women and is defined as 'feminism' that was responsible for the creation of localised women's associations. These associations emphasised women's education issues, developed livelihood strategies for working class women, and also organised national level women's associations such as the All India Women's Conference. AIWC was closely affiliated with the Indian National Congress. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, it worked within the nationalist and anti-colonialist freedom movements. This made the mass mobilisation of women an integral part of Indian nationalism. Women therefore were a very important part of various nationalist and anti-colonial efforts,

including the civil disobedience movements in the 1930. After independence, the All India Women's Conference continued to operate and in 1954 the Indian Communist Party formed its own women's wing known as the National Federation of Indian Women. However, feminist agendas and movements became less active right after India's independence in 1947, as the nationalist agendas on nation building took precedence over feminist issues. By the growth of Human Right Movement and Mississippi Laws in 19th century Property of Married Women Laws passes to empower women's status.

Women's participation in the struggle for freedom developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. There was provision for women's upliftment through affirmative action, maternal health and child care provision (crèches), equal pay for equal work etc. The state adopted a patronising role towards women. For example, India's constitution states that women are a *weaker section* of the population, and therefore need assistance to function as equals Thus women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. The utopia ended soon when the social and cultural ideologies and structures failed to honour the newly acquired concepts of fundamental rights and democracy.

Post independence feminists began to redefine the extent to which women were allowed to engage in the workforce. Prior to independence, most feminists accepted the sexual divide within the labour force. However, feminists in the 1970 challenged the inequalities that had been established and fought to reverse them. These inequalities included unequal wages for women, relegation of women to 'unskilled' spheres of work, and restricting women as a reserve army for labour. In other words, the feminists' aim was to abolish the free service of women who were essentially being used as cheap capital. Feminist class-consciousness also came into focus in the 1970s, with feminists recognising the inequalities not just between men and women but also within power structures such as caste, tribe, language, religion, region, class etc.. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the focus of the Indian feminist movement has gone beyond treating women as useful members of society and a right to parity, but also having the power to decide the course of their personal lives and the right of self-determination.

The state of Kerala is often viewed as the ideal progressive leader in the women's rights movement in India among states. Kerala maintains very high relative levels of female literacy and women's health, as well as greater female inheritance and property rights. For example, a 1998 study conducted by Bina

Agarwal found that while only thirteen percent of all women in India with landowning fathers inherited that land as daughters twenty four percent of such women were able to do so in the state of Kerala. This is important because it has been shown that measures to improve such access to property and economic independence through channels. Bangladesh was (mostly) the province of Bengal in India until 1947, and then it became part of Pakistan. It became an independent nation in 1971. Women have had equal suffrage since 1947, and they have reserved seats in parliament. Bangladesh is notable in that since 1991, two women, namely Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, have served terms as the country's Prime Minister continuously. Women have traditionally played a minimal role in politics beyond the anomaly of the two leaders; few used to run against men; few have been ministers. Recently, however, women have become more active in politics, with several prominent ministerial posts given to women and women participating in national, district and municipal elections against men and winning on several occasions. The Women's Indian Association (WIA) was founded in 1917. It sought votes for women and the right to hold legislative office on the same basis as men. These positions were endorsed by the main political groupings, the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League. British and Indian feminists combined in 1918 to publish a magazine *Stri Dharma* that featured international news from a feminist perspective. In 1919 in the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms, the British set up provincial legislatures which had the power to grant women's suffrage. Madras in 1921 granted votes to wealthy and educated women, under the same terms that applied to men. Whereas wealthy and educated women in Madras were granted voting right in 1921, in Punjab the Sikhs granted women equal voting rights in 1925 irrespective of their educational qualifications or being wealthy or poor. This happened when the *Gurdwara Act* of 1925 was approved. The original draft of the *Gurdwara Act* sent by the British to the Sharomani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC) did not include Sikh women, but the Sikhs inserted the clause without the women having to ask for it. Equality of women with men is enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred scripture of the Sikh faith. In the Government of India Act 1935 the British Raj set up a system of separate electorates and separate seats for women. Most women's leaders opposed segregated electorates and demanded adult franchise. In 1931 the Congress promised universal adult franchise when it came to power. It enacted equal voting rights for both men and women in 1947.

Beginning from the first inception of the Universe, there is a fascinating myth associated with the creation of woman by the Supreme Creator, Lord Brahma. And indeed, beginning from Brahma Himself, the idea of feminism in Indian literature, both oral and written, had begun to be established, though perhaps not as blatant as is today. World's two of the most prehistoric greatest epics, *Ramayana and Mahabharata*

written by two sages Valmiki and Ved Vyas have been composed pivoting around two central characters *Sita and Draupadi*, both women. It was during this time that the nascent stages of feminism was born in ancient Indian literature, the illustration of which needs no further introduction, the tribulations of both *Sita and Draupadi* is perhaps realised by every Indian presently. The key role women played in literature and life in the past and present in both parts of the globe is equally significant. In ancient Vedic literature, women were elevated to *Devis (Goddesses)*, they were turned into myths and legends. Her real identity of a woman however was provided by the primordial myth, that is social stereotypes which have been suggested, are two poles of feminine experience in the world. Sita absorbs all harshly imposed desolation and mortification of the male ego, whereas, Draupadi challenges the male ego to the epitomic limits of human excellence. Sita accepts, accommodates and withdraws; Draupadi resents, rejects and involves herself in the process of life as a protagonist. These two feminine archetypes define the limits of feminine experience in reality, especially the Indian literary reality. Even in the present day Indian literature, the gender division moves between new 'iconisations' of these two bold and prehistoric figures.

Poet Balaram Das was also known as revivalist of Vaishnavism. Popularly known as Panchasakha he had a considerable influence on Odia Literature. Lakshmi Purana composed by Balaram Das was an example of a piece of literature which talked of women liberation and had given birth to the spirits of feminism. But in reality Lakshmi Puran was written to popularise a *Brat or Vrat*. In Bengali literature Tarasankar Chotopadhaya, Mahasweta Devi, Asapurna Devi. In Indian literature writers like Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kusum Ansal (Hindi) and Sarojini Sahoo (Odia), who count amongst the most distinguished writers, making a link between sexuality and feminism and writing for the idea '*a woman's body, a woman's right*' in Indian languages. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Leela Kasturi, Sharmila Rege and Vidyut Bhagat are some other group of essayists and critics, who write in passionate favour of feminism in Indian English literature. However, not only the contemporary times and British Indian times, feminist literature in India has existed in India from the Vedic Period, with the gradually changing face of women coming to light in every age, with its distinctiveness. From court to miss universe, politics to socialist, space to continent it has spread widely. Women Commission, Women Samit, Self Help Group, Nari Mukti Morcha, Women's day, has been proved that all are equal irrespective gender. Renounced feminist Pramilla Kalhan says in India since independence "The ideal picture of a women was one of an uncoupling herself for them, she was otherwise no separate entity". Now the women have ample freedom in every step of life. In contemporary the women goes to office, look after family, she gives speeches in



public, she take part in sports, she becomes leader etc. Liberal feminist movement radical feminist movement, Marxist feminist movement raise voice in favour of women in general. Fourth decade of Nineteenth Century Tailor and Milling's 'Early essay on Marriage and Divorce', Tailor's 'Enfranchisement', Willingstone's "A Vindication of the right of the women" Kamil Collect's "The Governor's Daughters", Elizabeth Kardy's "The Solitude of Self (1892)" etc. regarded women as the bird of cage and raise voice to free women's from the chain. Someone divide feminism as black feminist, radical feminist, Lesbian feminist, Marxist feminist, psycho analytic feminist etc.

Women are not only part of society but also a separate entity. She requires freedom from all the conservative system of the Indian society. Now a day's women are establishing themselves in every walk of life. They want to stand on their own feet to establish their existence in the society. With the changing time, women's are come forward to immerge themselves in the mainstream of the society. There should not be gender discrimination among us although women are considering weaker section of the society.

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