



Recent Feminist History Writing: A Critical Study

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Since time immemorial women had an inferior position in almost every sphere. When we turn to history, the situation is no different. From the 1960s, with the feminist writings reaching a new height, a critical approach towards the past, history developed. The feminists developed a strong critique of the discipline of history. The main attempt of this paper is to analyse the new elements that feminist history has brought to the existing historical methods. In doing so, a whole lot of new terminology, critical approaches, discourses will be discussed, essentially from the perspectives of the leading feminist historians.

The starting point of this essay can be conventional outlook which treats men and women as two different species, with different attributes and mentally opposed to each other. In short, they are two different order of beings altogether. The feminists argue that both men and women are similar to each other, sharing similar mental thinking and so on. Only they are biologically different from each other. From herein, comes the notion of biological inferiority of women and the placing them on a subordinate position in the society.

The feminist tradition critiqued and opposed the tradition of women. Judith Bennett is of the opinion that women's history has always been marginalized. This can be undone by breaking down the marginalization by integrating the history of women with the histories of class and race.¹ Once the feminist historians have arrived at the centre stage, they wanted to radically challenge the discipline of history by bringing women into the historical mainstream, by critiquing patriarchy and other narratives where women had been sidelined always. As Joan Scott says that they wanted to alter the change the discipline of history and "take rightful place as historians".

The first question that comes to our mind- what is feminism? Feminism can be defined as having an explicit political kind of knowledge/agenda. With the absence of socialist strand, the feminist tradition of USA drew inspiration from libertarian, democratic and populist strands. Historians have argued whether feminism is a utopian concept or scientific in nature? Barbara Taylor in her essay argues that the Owenites

¹ Judith M. Bennett, 'Feminism and History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge, 2006), p.70.

were the first British socialists who dealt with the issue of female emancipation. Engels identified the humanist outlook towards feminism as the characteristic feature of the Owenite ideology. Here Taylor has drawn a comparison between Marxism and the Owenite ideology. She writes that in Marxism, sexism was reduced to a bourgeois property relation, thus moving it out completely from the working class struggle. In contrast, the Owenites demanded that 'male supremacy' be replaced with sexual equality within the proletariat. They wanted to achieve a unity of the sex when it came to facing common enemy. However the Owenite thinking which revolved around the re-organisation of sexual and female existence was pushed to a corner by the socialists whose main aim was to attain economic revolution which in turn would liberate the working class automatically.² For the Owenites the establishment of a right order in sexual relations became a key to moral re-organisation. The economic struggle of the single class took the centre stage. As such women's interests were pushed to the side. All questions related to reproduction, marriage, personal existence were considered as personal matters and they were never addressed.³ Taylor sites that at the gatherings of the Social Democrats it was declared that "petty" issues of the women were not to be brought to the forefront. Hence, throughout history there has been a tendency to push aside the issues concerning women to the private domain were never addressed.

Marx observed that female inheritance was dependent in nature⁴. Marx spoke about the inferior position of women and acknowledged the perennial domination of men. However he did not build on this. In Marxism, there is only one route to communism which would be taken by the organised work force. As such only a minority group of women took part. Marxism does not deal with the question of women and does address their grievances separately. Hence the feminists critics argue that Marxism was concerned only with how to organise women for revolution and not "free them as a sex". The female employment in the organised industrial sector was very low. There was a tendency to view socialism to be male centric in nature. This situation was challenged by women Marxists who felt that women can equally participate alongside the men folk in their attempt to achieve the common goal. In the 1970s the socialist feminists challenged the male-dominated left groups, organisations.⁵ Sheila Rowbotham has argued that political consciousness had developed among the social feminists of the 19th century.⁶ Critics have critiqued Marxism on its basic assumption that class struggle is a historical process. The critics have argued that class as a concept need not have a historical context. But it will be problematic for Marxist interpretation as they assume that class struggle take place throughout history. In its place sexuality and body emerged as the focus of new analysis.⁷

Penelope Corfield says that history of gender has established itself within the discipline of history. It has been accepted as an essential component analysis. While discussing feminist history, parallels are drawn with women and gender history. *Women's history* can be defined by the subject content and it does not evoke a feminist perspective. In other words, it is a historical work on women. *Gender history*, focuses on the inter dependence and relational nature of male and female identities, shifting away from the focus of women. *Feminist history*, on the other hand, is defined by its theoretical agenda. It is the historical work infused by concern about past and present oppression of women. They are not identical. However they are closely connected, overlap and complement each other.⁸ Gender has the advantage of integrating both men and women into any subject. It basically is the social constructions of 'maleness and femaleness'. Judith

² Barbara Taylor, 'Socialist Feminism: Utopian or Scientific', in Raphael Samuel(ed.), 'People's History and Socialist Theory', (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.,1981),pp.158-159.

³ Ibid,p.160.

⁴ Catherine Hall, 'Gender Divisions and Class Formation in the Birmingham Middle Class, 1780-1850, in Raphael Samuel(ed.), 'People's History and Socialist Theory', (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.,1981),pp.166.

⁵ Barbara Taylor, 'Socialist Feminism: Utopian or Scientific', in Raphael Samuel(ed.), 'People's History and Socialist Theory', (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.,1981),p.162.

⁶ Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, 'The trouble with Patriarchy', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),p.55.

⁷ Penelope Corfield, June Purvis, Amanda Weatherill, 'History and the challenge of Gender History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),p.122.

⁸ Sue Morgan, 'Introduction: Writing Feminist History: Theoretical Debates and critical practices,' The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),p.4.

Bennett argues that the historical study of gender has advantages serving as a reminder that 'natural' ideas about men and women are socially constructed. The intersection of race, class and gender has provided a politically correct approach. However it has few problems- such as it accommodates the interests of the powerful and the exclude the silent ones. The question of ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status are ignored.⁹

Catherine Hall analyses the middle class culture where the ideals of masculinity and femininity and the ideology of the separate spheres shaped its mentality. Middle class consciousness revolved around a series of public events where women played no part. Gender division creates contradictions within the middle class which led to the emergence of bourgeois feminism in the 19th century. Hall cites examples from Birmingham in the 19th century when women were not allowed to enter the economic sphere. The notion that prevailed was that women were to be confined to the household and look after the family. They were incapable of looking after a factory.¹⁰ There was also demarcation in the nature of work- male sphere of work separate from the female sphere, with the women's work considered to be inferior. Hall characterises the 18th -19th century society of England where the women had no role to play in the public sphere. At the economic and political level women were considered to be subordinate to men. Women were treated as "God's poorest creature". The only movement where women played an important was in the Anti-Slavery movement. In other movements they played a supportive role eg. Anti-Corn Law League.¹¹

This notion of women as inferior beings has been ever present in the society. Barbara Taylor points out that with the enslavement of women by men, the social hierarchy became accepted as something which is natural and inevitable. Man gaining control at home attempted to establish himself in the public sphere. For Taylor this individual at the centre of the bourgeois culture was the product of the patriarchal system of psycho-sexual relations.¹²

Penelope Corfield points out that the 'essentialist' view of the feminists implies that women's nature could be traced through history. Masculinity and Femininity are not natural but cultural creations. Corfield points out that the new emphasis is in favour of a social constructionist view derived from the writings of *Michel Foucault* on the 'History of sexuality'. Foucault has argued that gender roles were socially constructed through discourse.¹³ Gender roles were imposed by the norms of the society. The idea of being male and female is socially constructed.

Joan Scott has defined gender as constituting four elements- cultural symbols, normative concepts, social institutions and organizations and subjective identity. Gender becomes synonymous with women in most cases. Borrowing from *Foucault*, Scott puts forward her view that gender denotes cultural constructions. It is the social creation of ideas about the appropriate roles of men and women. Gender identity constructed through language which is the central to Lacanian theory. Scott critiques gender by arguing that it does not have the analytical power to address historical paradigms. Scott has opined that within Marxism, gender has been treated as by-product of changing economic structures. Scott argues that terms of sexual difference must be deconstructed using Derrida's definition of 'deconstruction'. Scott has opined that feminist history refuses the hierarchical construction of the relationship between the male and the female in their specific contexts and they attempt to reverse or remove these hierarchies. She has theorized gender in her second proposition (normative concepts) where gender is a primary concept within which or by means of which power is articulated. Scott identifies politics as the only area where gender can be used for historical analysis. She sites examples when gender has been used in political theory to justify or criticize

⁹ Judith M. Bennett, 'Feminism and History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge, 2006), p.63.

¹⁰ Catherine Hall, 'Gender Divisions and Class Formation in the Birmingham Middle Class, 1780-1850', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), 'People's History and Socialist Theory', (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), pp.20-22.

¹¹ Ibid, pp.169-170.

¹² Barbara Taylor, 'Socialist Feminism: Utopian or Scientific', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), 'People's History and Socialist Theory', (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), p.161.

¹³ Penelope Corfield, June Purvis, Amanda Weatherill, 'History and the challenge of Gender History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge, 2006), p.120.

the reigns of the monarchs and express the relationship between the ruler and the ruled- debates on the reign of Elizabeth 1 of England. Scott also points out that high politics is also a gendered concept as it excludes women from its domain.¹⁴ Judith Bennet has critiqued Joan Scott's study of gender. Bennett is of the opinion that Scott had ignored women. She had expressed very little interest in material reality and has shown the inequality of the sexes in an abstract light.¹⁵

There is an interesting connection between gender history and post modernism. They cannot be identified together but both agree on certain aspects. Both agree that social categories are 'mutable', fluid and 'slippery'. The behavioural norms imposed on the individual by society has been critiqued by both post modernists and gender historians. On the opposite hand, post modernism has a sceptical outlook particularly towards women's history. Keith Jenkins advocates a separate space for feminist history outside the historical mainstream, where a separate 'her story' can develop.¹⁶ This is not liked by feminist historians as they feel it would again marginalize feminist history. Here once again one notices the reluctance to accord a place to feminist history within the discipline of history.

While dealing with feminist history the most important institution that is most widely discussed is patriarchy. Here too, a debate between Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, also Judith Bennett's take on patriarchy will be discussed extensively. Judith Bennett has viewed patriarchy as a historical phenomenon. Feminist scholars have attacked the term patriarchy arguing that in its place terms such as 'male dominance' and 'sex gender system' should be used.¹⁷ Sheila Rowbotham has viewed patriarchy as an ideology, denoting men's power to exchange women between kinship groups. In literal meaning, it means the power of the father. It denotes men's control over women's sexuality, fertility and the various institutional structures male domination. She has identified that patriarchy has some inherent problems. It implies a universal form oppression where the biological difference and the multiple ways in which gender has been defined has become obscured. It implies that there is a single determining cause of women's subordination. It is a fixed structure and provides no historical agency to women by forcing her to embrace 'fatalistic submission'. Women's political action has been challenged not by the ruling class but by the men's idea of women's role. Men's dependence on women in the family, in the community and at work is clearly evident as women's subordination.¹⁸ As such patriarchy will not be able to do justice as it has little analytical power for analysing male/female form of relationships. The historical concept of sex-gender relationship is cannot be analysed in the institution of patriarchy.

In their critique of Rowbotham's essay, Alexander and Taylor identifies social inequalities of gender as the main problem. They want to eliminate the male power and not men. In their response to Sheila who commented that men and women love and support each other in moments of class confrontation, Taylor and Alexander questions if this shows that class antagonism does not prevail or not. They believe that sexual antagonism needs to be analysed further.¹⁹ This view of Taylor and Alexander has been shared by Judith Bennett. She argues that patriarchy ignores different experiences of women belonging to different times. Bennett is of the view that the oppression of women continued with their co-operation. She feels that the division of women as victims and agent is a false one. Women were not only passive victims of patriarchy but have survived it. They have always faced ideological, institutional, practical barriers. Bennett argues that it is not possible to know the time and the place of origin of patriarchy, but it has

¹⁴ Joan Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis,' Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),pp.136-144.

¹⁵ Judith M. Bennett, 'Feminism and History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),p.63.

¹⁶ Penelope Corfield, June Purvis, Amanda Weatherill, 'History and the challenge of Gender History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),p.123.

¹⁷ Judith M. Bennett, 'Feminism and History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),pp.64-65.

¹⁸ Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, 'The trouble with Patriarchy', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),pp.52-53.

¹⁹ Ibid,pp.57-58.

survived, transformed, adapted throughout time. She identifies women as agents in the study of patriarchy and not as victims.²⁰

Another strand of feminism is Radical feminism. They have emerged as active members of the feminist group. Radical feminists in USA drew inspiration from radical American 'native' culture and political traditions which Ellen Ross says is quite active in America. Radical feminists have set up alternative living arrangements and economic and political structures. They want to live at a distance from the male domination. They believe that patriarchal system needs to undergo radical transformation. Kate Millet has defined patriarchy as apolitical system where power was allocated differently to men and women. The radical feminists argue that division of society was not created by nature, but are socially created being a product of sex/gender systems. Anthropologist has identified kinship system as a vehicle for sex/gender system, where women were exchanged. This signified male dominance. Ellen Ross says that though capitalism is intertwined with sex and gender, eliminating capitalism would not improve the situation as gender system has its roots in kinship and individual psyches.²¹

In the nationalist paradigm, a gender neutral analysis is followed when men and masculinity treated as universal categories and ignored the marginalization of women. As such it is not surprising that feminism has an antipathy for the nation.²² Though, they were sidelined in the public sphere, in the nationalist discourse, the women represented the symbol of nationalist culture. The control of women's sexuality served as a marker for community boundaries. The feminists scholars argue that nation is essentially a masculine or a heterosexual male construct.²³ In the nationalist discourse, nation is often represented as the female body. Mrinalini sinha writes that in the process of identification of nation with a female body and the presence of feminine metaphors, the women were able to create a place for themselves in the national narrative. In the nationalist imagination, the women had to be a well blend mixture of pre-colonial tradition and western modernity.²⁴ All these were endowed upon her as she was seen as preserving the honour of the nation. An interesting aspect highlighted in this essay by Mrinalini sinha is what she terms as the politics of 'colonial masculinity' in the British empire. The construction of 'white' British masculinity was based on its difference from the effeminate native men and also through its role as being the benevolent protector of the 'oriental' women. In the colonial context, the idea of a 'white men saving brown women from brown men' was a characteristic feature of the 'white' British masculinity. Similarly, the native men sought to reclaim their honour and 'masculinity' claimed to protect/control the native women from British and the foreign influence.²⁵ Nation plays an important role in the construction of gender. Nation is instrumental in the construction of 'men' and 'women'. Nation constructs a natural hierarchy between men and women through a heterosexual relationship, wherein, women were identified with private and family sphere and on this basis they were excluded.²⁶ Thus nation always produces differences when one group will always be marginalised. Nation always demand differential sacrifice from one group, and in the colonial context it was the women who made the sacrifice. It is an irony that women who were thought to represent the national culture were completely sidelined in the public domain. The radical approach of the feminist historians towards the nationalist discourse is based on these exclusionary nature of a nation.

The feminist historians believe that some success has been attained. However they believe that there is a long way to go. Penelope Corfield has said that one of the successful ventures was the fact that women's history was now being taken up seriously. She also points out that with the absorption of women's history in the broader social- cultural sphere of history, it has achieved the success it was striving for. Judith

²⁰ Judith M. Bennett, 'Feminism and History', The Feminist History Reader (Routledge,2006),pp.64-67.

²¹ Ellen Ross, 'Women's History in the USA', in Raphael Samuel(ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.,1981),pp.182-184.

²² Mrinalini Sinha, 'Gender and Nation', The Feminist History Reader, (Routledge, 2006),p.324.

²³ Ibid,pp.325-327.

²⁴ Ibid,p.329.

²⁵ Ibid,pp.330-331.

²⁶ Ibid,p.332.

Bennett is quite optimistic of the fact that if the study of patriarchy is taken up as central problem to women's history, then definitely better feminist history will be produced.

Feminists advocate a space for feminist history within the discipline of history. They critique the mainstream as women had been marginalised or rather absent in the historical writings. Now with the space that had been accorded to them within the mainstream, the feminist historians are using it to critique the hierarchal structure of the society. A detailed study of the historical methods makes it clear no none of the 'isms' in their historical discourse have made women the main focus. Still now there is a feeling that 'her story' as Keith Jenkins terms it will develop outside the discipline. This conjures up a pessimistic picture where there is still a long way to go before an equal footing is achieved.

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