

# Perspectives On Feminism

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## **Abstract**

Feminism tends to be thought of as a movement of women, and many feminists absolutely reject the idea of allowing men into it. However, men can be as strongly opposed to the injustices from which women suffer as women can. Feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit, but with a type of injustice it wants to eliminate. It is not just movement in favour of women, but also a movement against injustice. The people touched upon many issues of slavery. Their works discuss the troubles experienced within slavery—jealous mistresses, sexual exploitation, intelligence as a blessing or curse, community, and motherhood – as well as those that extended past the abolition—continued servitude, the pains and rewards of remembering, and the search for self-worth—and even the issues faced and decisions made by black women in the process of writing and publication.

**Keywords-** Feminism, Patriarchy, Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism.

Feminism is an intense awareness of female identity, the subjugation of which causes disorder in society. The term ‘feminism’ was derived from the Latin word ‘Femina’ meaning ‘woman’. It is an umbrella term for different point of views about injustice against women.

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The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that woman suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism. (*Women Writer's Talking* 3).

Feminist theory encompasses work in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art, history, psychoanalysis and philosophy. It tries to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. While providing a critique of social and political relations, feminist theory also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. Themes explored in feminist theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression, and patriarchy. Feminism solidified into a political movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It was an attempt to contend with patriarchy. Chris Weedon's writes:

The term 'patriarchal' refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on the social meaning given to biological sexual difference.  
*(Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory)*

Aristotelian philosophy deemed women to be inferior men. It was supplemented with Renaissance which provided enlightened views for women, especially with regard to their education. The early polemicists returned to the very sources used to justify the oppression of women.

From Aristotle, all have defined women as secondary, inferior, and relative to men. Beauvoir remarks:

Man has defined himself as the absolute, the Norm and woman as the 'other'. Thus humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being (Beauvoir, 15)

Beauvoir finds it supporting that though man has treated woman as the 'other', woman has never resisted nor reacted. This unwillingness to resist this situation further reduces her status. Ultimately, Beauvoir feels that woman herself is held responsible for accepting an inferior status and holding a secondary status. She feels that women will have to emerge out of the designated position and struggle for her freedom. She encourages the women to write about their experiences for they themselves can decimate the meaning of being a woman in a patriarchal society. She says,

We know the feminine world, more intimately than the men, because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to be a human being, to be feminine and we are more concerned with such knowledge. (Beauvoir, 26).

At the end of the analysis, she draws a conclusion that man and woman relationship will be profoundly altered for the better, if their relations are based on equal footing. She emphasizes the importance of family ties when she says, “To emancipate woman is to refuse to chain her to the relation she bears to man, not to deny them to her” (Beauvoir, 740). Simon de Beauvoir notes:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

Women did not have any formal rights in local or national government, including the right to vote. The conditions for the education of women largely improved from 1550-1700. Women were barred from receiving a university education and the concomitant benefits. She had no recourse to law for equality of pay and conditions. Married women had no legal independence from their husbands. It was very difficult for women to achieve economic independence. Marriage was one of the few ways in which women could secure their future. The financial arrangements of a marriage throughout the period were, a wife would bring a dowry with her, which was as substantial an amount of property. The husband provided the wife with a jointure the purpose of which was to maintain her for the rest of her life. It included providing her food, cloth, and shelter. She was provided with a jointure which insured a lifetime interest in the property. It gave the hapless woman a place to live. Childbearing was a major part of the wife’s role, be it to provide male heirs to her husband’s lands and titles or to provide a source of labour.

Toril Moi has used the term ‘post-feminism’ to cover the different aspects of feminism and post-modernism. Present day feminist theorists see it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. It posits feminism as the necessary resistance to patriarchal power. The aim of feminism as an emancipator becomes to abolish itself along with its opponent. Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become like men. But the struggle for equal rights historically and politically emphasizes the value of women as they are. The argument is based upon the fact that women are

already as capable as men are, though they need equal opportunities to develop their merit and prove their worth. When feminism represents the value of women as women, it efficiently counters the systematic devaluation of women under patriarchy.

Feminist literary theory has evolved according to the needs and demands of the international women's movement. Feminist literature and criticism is an offspring of the feminist movement, which has been steadily gathering momentum in the twentieth century. The suffrage activity, the entry of women into the work force during and after the world wars, the disintegration of the traditional roles of man and woman as bread-winner and home-maker, the consequent strain on family relationship- all these have contributed to a new image of woman and a new self-awareness in woman.

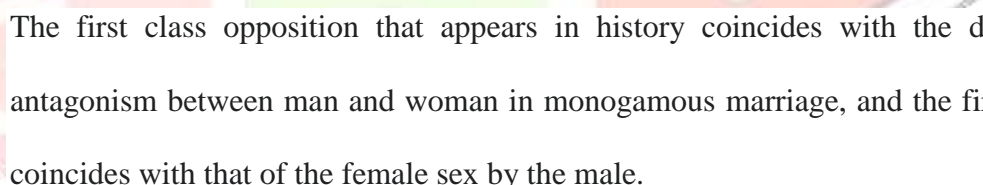
Feminist criticism also attempts to study the effect of society and environment on the work of woman writers. For contemporary feminists, different processes of socialization account for the observed differences in the behavior of men and women. They protest the way the social institutions, supported by cultural values force women into an unreasonably narrow role. Feminism as a philosophy fights against definitions of masculine and feminine and aims at placing women in a just perspective. It has become an international school. There are different schools like Marxist, Radical, Socialist, Liberal and Existentialist. These theories cover several aspects of life aiming at women's liberty. Feminism does not mean only an awareness of women's plight but also a determination to change the situation. Simone de Beauvoir notes that, the woman is

defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other.

Marxist feminism incorporates Marxist theory by analysing the ways in which women are exploited through capitalism and the individual ownership of property. According to them, women's liberation can only be achieved by dismantling the capitalist system in which much of women's labour is uncompensated. Marxist feminists extend traditional Marxist analysis by applying it to unpaid domestic labour and sex relations. Marxism follows the development of oppression and class division in the evolution of human society through the development and organization of wealth and production and concludes the evolution of oppressive social structure to be relative to the evolution of oppressive family structures. The

normalization of oppressing the female sex coincides with the formation of oppressive society in general. Gender oppression is reproduced culturally and maintained through institutionalized inequality. By privileging men at the expense of women and refusing to acknowledge traditional domestic labour as equally valuable, the working-class man is socialized into an oppressive structure which marginalizes the working-class woman.

Marxist feminist authors in the 1970s, such as Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton, relied heavily on analysis of productive and unproductive labour in an attempt to shift the perception of the time that consumption was the purpose of a family, presenting arguments for a state-paid wage to homemakers, and a cultural perception of the family as a productive entity. In capitalism, the work of maintaining a family has little material value, as it produces no marketable products. In Marxism, the maintenance of a family is productive, as it has a service value, and is used in the same sense as a commodity. Notable Marxist feminists are Angela Davis, Anuradha Ghandy, Simon De Beauvoir, Claudia Jones and Evelyn Reed. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Friedrich Engels writes, "The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children", to say,



The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.

Radical feminists assert that society is a patriarchy in which men are the oppressors of women. The ideology of radical feminism developed as a component of the women's liberation movement. Radical Feminism helped cross the bridge that divided radical protest for racial equality over the struggle for women's rights, by witnessing the discrimination and oppression to which the black population was subjected, they were able to gain strength and motivation to do the same for their fellow women. They took up the cause and advocated for a variety of women's issues, including abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, access to credit and equal pay. This sect of feminist group emphasized the creation of alternative institutions and women-only spaces.

The traditional radical feminist views patriarchy as a “transhistorical phenomenon” that is not only the oldest and most universal form of domination but the primary form of oppression that is manifested everywhere (Willis 118). In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir establishes the importance of woman’s questioning of her social and intellectual milieu. She feels that most of the definitions of ‘woman’s nature’ come from male thinkers. She remarks

The whole of feminine history being man-made [...] men have always held the lot of women in their hands and they have determined what it should be, not according to her interests, but rather with regard to their projects, their fears and their needs (Beauvoir, 128).

Radical feminism argues that patriarchy is very hard to eradicate because it is rooted in the belief that women are different and inferior and is deeply embedded in most men’s consciousness. It claims that most men have the potential to use physical violence against women, including rape and murder. The manifestation of this misogyny is the way women are depicted as sex objects in the mass media, as pieces of meat in pornography and the exploitation of girls and women in prostitution. Radical feminism postulates patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into distorted relationships. It causes domination and oppression of woman by man. Radical feminists aim to challenge and overthrow patriarchy by opposing standard gender roles and call for a radical reformulation of society (Tong 95-96).

Socialist feminism is a reaction against the Marxist tendency viewing women oppression as being less important than workers’ oppression (Tong 173). Feminism belonging to this school of thought considers all capitalist societies as patriarchal. Their elimination is possible only through a change in the mode of production. But a complete erasure of patriarchy can occur only when the existent ideology is altered. Social feminists call for a connection between Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis claiming that it will help in woman’s search for liberation. Socialist feminists refer to the work of Juliet Mitchell who considers a woman’s status and function in society to be determined by her sexuality, and her role in production and reproduction. She insists that the position and role of woman is same in every society regardless of her race, class and ethnicity. (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism* 408). The position of woman as victim cannot be completely erased or transformed by any study, suffrage movement or policy as the oppression is embedded in an individual’s psyche.

Socialist feminism encompasses an analysis of the different forms of oppressive treatments meted out to women and the gendered division of labour though the implementation of this theory requires a complete transformation of the existing social structures and ideologies which requires individual and collective initiative. Socialist feminists attempt to produce a creative synthesis of radical feminism and Marxist feminism. Socialist feminists agree with Marxist feminist's claim that liberal feminism does not appreciate the depth of the oppression of women and only addresses the situation of women of the upper and upper middle classes. They also agree that women have been oppressed in virtually all known societies, but the nature of this oppression has differed because of the different economic realities.

Socialist feminists do not think that the oppression of women is based solely on the economic system and they suggest that patriarchy and capitalism are combined into one system. They believe that we must understand the effects of colonization, imperialism, and racism on the women of the world. Socialist feminists maintain that it is wrong to suggest that any one form of oppression is the most important or key form of oppression. Instead, they recognize that oppression based on gender, class, race, and sexual orientation are all are interwoven. To effectively challenge any one of these forms of oppression, we must understand and challenge all of them:

I choose to re-appropriate the term "feminism", to focus on the fact that to be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from the sexist role patterns, domination and oppression. (*Ain't I a woman? Black women and feminism*).

Socialist feminists emphasize the economic, social and cultural importance of women as people who give birth, rear children, and care for the sick. It employs the emotional labour that creates the realm of the home as a retreat for men from the realities of the workplace and the public arena. Socialist feminists see this as important labor that is overlooked and denigrated. They are concerned with the reality of the 'double day' for most of the women. Socialist feminists emphasize that within the workplace women face challenges of job market segregation, lower wages for the same work, and sexual harassment. They also recognize that the labour movement has been complacent in addressing to these.

Liberal feminism asserts the equality of men and women through legal and political reforms. It focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their identity through their own action and choices. Liberal feminists

feel that change is possible without altering the structure of the society as all women are capable enough of asserting their individuality and sharing equal status with men. They campaign for women's civil rights like the right to vote, freedom of speech and expression, equal rights to inherit property, freedom to practice one's own religion as well as the provision of basic amenities for every person, such as legal aid, school, loans, ration, medical care, social security. Liberal feminists are part of a long tradition that begins with classical liberal thought. This tradition regards human beings as rational, autonomous, and self-interested individuals. This tradition strongly values liberty. It argues for a state that will protect liberty and not undermine it.

The struggle for women's suffrage was the first large project of liberal feminism. This struggle was interwoven with the struggle against slavery and for the rights of African Americans. Women in the U.S. won the vote in 1920. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we see a division in the classical liberal tradition. Many theorists- including the people we now call liberals – came to believe that human beings should not just have the traditional “negative” rights of liberty. They came to believe that liberty would have little meaning without rights that emphasized equal opportunity. These liberals came to defend what philosophers call “positive” rights. These are rights that require money from taxation such as the right to education, healthcare, and affordable childcare. These positive rights provide for equal opportunity and should be crafted with the women's situations in mind. Moderate reforms will secure the liberation of women. The structure of the state, the economy, and the family do not need to be fundamentally changed. Critics of liberal feminism point to a lack of critique of basic gender relationships, a focus on state action which links women's interests to those of the powerful, a lack of class or race analysis, and a lack of analysis of ways in which women are different from men.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) lays bare the stark reality of the barren life led by almost all the eighteenth century affluently married, bourgeois women. She disagrees with Rousseau's that every girl needs to indulge in such pursuits as music, art, poetry and fiction in order to be the perfect role-model as a wife which forces her to lose her identity. She believes that only proper education can develop a woman's rationality and moral capability. Education could enlighten and thus could make her perform her duties better to her husband and children. She insists that there is a connection between education and virtue. Women need to be educated in order to lead a virtuous life and faithfully perform their duties as a wife and mother. Till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge



would receive continual checks. Portraying women as superior to men, she wanted to raise their overall moral and intellectual stature to make them into more rational citizens. She accepted that most middle-class women would marry and remain at home. She wanted girl education which could provide them economic independence. She wanted them to give them freedom and dignity. She saw women as degraded by the flirtatious and chivalrous behaviour of their male companion and sought their emancipation by education.

All of these women have used their writing to touch upon many issues of slavery. Their works discuss the troubles experienced within slavery—jealous mistresses, sexual exploitation, intelligence as a blessing or curse, community, and motherhood – as well as those that extended past the abolition—continued servitude, the pains and rewards of remembering, and the search for self-worth—and even the issues faced and decisions made by black women in the process of writing and publication, such as linear versus cyclical narratives and audience. The most striking difference between the slave narratives and modern pieces concerning slavery is the matter of audience. While earlier the intention was to bring white women further into the sphere of the abolition movement and exhort pity for their plight, authors today have no specific agenda for their writing. They have no need to rely on a particular audience, at least not to the extent of hiding the truth for the sake of self-preservation—a way that African Americans had to during a time in which the world still believed them to be a sort of subspecies of human.

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