

## Gender Discrimination and Feminist Discourse in Literature

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### Abstract

Feminism is difficult to describe accurately because of its multiplicity of meanings. However many attempts have been made to define it comprehensively. Thus, the term 'feminism' can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political, cultural and sociological theories, as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. It is also a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. It is not trying to make women better than men, just equal. It examines relationship between men and women and their roles in society. It is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining equal political, economic, cultural and social rights for women. It demands equal opportunities for women in education and employment. Feminists advocate the rights and equality of women. Feminist theory is one of the major contemporary theories. It is a gendered base theory. Elaine Showalter identifies feminist theory in three phases. French feminists also developed their own view on the basis of concept of writing. They consider female writing is very important. Helene Cixous advocates phallogocentric writing. Luce Irigaray advocates writing from the body as a subversive exercise. The other French feminists propagated their views are Julia Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger and others. Many other scholars also propounded their theories in this regard. The present paper is an attempt to explore feminist theories.

**KEYWORDS:** feminism, gender discrimination, patriarchy, and education

**“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”**

**Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex***

Feminism is difficult to describe accurately. It has multiplicity of meanings. Thus, the term 'feminism' can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political, cultural and sociological theories, as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. It is also a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. It is not trying to make women better than men, just equal. It examines relationship between men and women and their roles in society. It is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining equal political, economic, cultural and social rights for women. It demands equal opportunities for women in education and employment. Feminists advocate the rights and equality of women.

The French philosopher Charles Fourier has coined the term 'feminism' in 1837. Later it is used in England and America later in the year 1890s and 1910 respectively. For the first time, Oxford Dictionary lists the term 'feminist' in the year 1894.

Feminist theory is one of the major contemporary theories. It is a gendered base theory. It analyzes the status of women and men in society with the purpose of using that knowledge to better lives of women. Feminist theorists have questioned racism, class,

ethnicity, in relation to gender. Feminist theory is most concerned with giving a voice to women. It highlights the various ways women have contributed to society.

Feminist theory tries to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and their pragmatic experiences. It is a stance and a political position. This is a perspective through which literature and art is analyzed, interpreted and evaluated. This theory is emerged from feminist movements. This theory is based on the movements related to sex and gender which try to establish social justice. Feminist activists propagate women's rights such as reproductive rights, property law, voting etc. The Feminist movements have changed the lifestyle of society. These movements try to protect women, girls from domestic violence and sexual harassment. Their main aim is to provide equal rights to women in all the respects. They advocated struggle against discrimination of women. Feminists across the world have different goals and agendas.

Feminist theory is an outcome of feminism into theoretical and philosophical fields. It is inclusive of anthropology, sociology, women's studies, psychoanalysis, history and literary criticism. Feminist theory aims at gender equality and tries to understand gender inequality. It focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Feminist theory questions Patriarchy, oppression, stereotyping, sexual objectification in every sense. Feminist theory rejects the depiction of weak, docile, innocent, seductive, irrational and sentimental women. It even questions such social order. Feminists theory believes that the inequality between men and women is deliberate destined by male dominated society created by men. The norms and principles practiced in religion, family, education, ethics and other aspects are governed by male oriented society. Such practices are oppressive and harmful.

Virginia Woolf writes "A Woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine, the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine. Toni Moi defines "Feminist criticism is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism." Lisa Tuttle has defined feminist theory as asking "New questions of old texts."

The development of feminism is traced in the form of waves. There are three waves of Feminist theory. The first wave of this theory is concerned with Civil Rights Movement or Suffragette movement. It comprises the period of 1830-1920. The second wave of feminist theory is concerned with networking of women's groups and deeper links with political debates. It comprises around the period of 1960s. The third wave of this theory is Post-modern feminism which comes around 1980s. Post-modern feminist includes Marxist feminism, French feminism, cyber-feminism, eco-feminism and post-colonial feminist theory.

Elaine Showalter identifies feminist theory in three phases namely, i) feminist critique, ii) gynocriticism, and iii) gender theory. According to Elaine Showalter, in feminist critique, the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena, in gynocriticism, the woman is producer of textual meaning, in gender theory, the ideological inscription and the literary effects of the gender are explored. Gender theory includes Gay studies, Lesbianism etc.

French feminists have also developed their own view on the basis of concept of writing. They consider female writing or feminine writing is very important. Helene Cixous advocates phallogocentric writing. Luce Irigaray advocates writing from the body as a subversive exercise. The other French feminists propagated their views are Julia Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger and others.

### **First Wave Feminist theory (1830-1920)**

Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are the major exponents of first wave feminist theory. Mary Wollstonecraft is the first woman

thinker to propose that gender roles are not natural but social. In her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she strongly rejects the established view that women are naturally weaker and inferior to men. She finds the cause of discrimination and inferiority due to lack of women education. Wollstonecraft demands the equality of women with men. She believed that women are integral part of society and they play a crucial role in society. She advocates the change in socialization process. Her major contribution is shifting femininity as natural to femininity as social. She changed biological perspective of gender to social perspective. She assigns specific gender roles to men and women.

Margaret Fuller is another leading activist in America. She propagated that education was the means of emancipation. Fuller advocated education, employment and political rights to women. Fuller does not assign any specific gender roles to men and women. She rejects the prototype picture of women and her roles in family. She out-rightly rejects confinement of domestic duties of women. She questioned the gender roles. Fuller argued that each male and female are not complete in themselves. Each male has feminine sensibility and each female has male sensibility. She shows her concerns towards the classes. She applied the gender roles and inequality in power relations. She demands for good prison conditions for women prisoners in jail. She believes that Black American struggle is also parallel to emancipation of women.

Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) explored gender related issues. She has propagated woman-centric stance of reading. She argued that male dominated society restricts women in many ways. Male dominated society sets male perspective and forces woman's reading in that perspective only. Women are trained to read from the male outlook only. Of course, this outlook is male centric in nature. The woman writers use language which is patriarchal in nature. They follow male generated forms of writing style and perceptions. She also believes in the views of Fuller. She advocates each male and female have some symptoms of their opposite sex. In the man's brain the man dominates over the woman and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal life is only when both live in harmony. She follows the psychological theory of Carl Jung to establish this argument.

### **Second Wave Feminism (around 1960s)**

During the Women's Movement of 1960s the second wave feminism came into existence. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) marks beginning of Second wave feminism. The women activists and feminist writers exposed the marginalization of women under male dominance. The writers such as Helen Cixous, Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Kate Millett, Lisa Tuttle, Alison Jugger, Susan Gubar, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Simon de Beauvoir have questioned male hegemony in their works during 1960s. This group of feminism advocates social constructionist view of gender. The second wave feminism laid the bases for literary feminism.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist Philosopher is the major exponent of this wave of feminism. She is women's rights activist. Her journal *Questions feminists* marks the moment when first wave feminist theory begins to the second wave feminist theory. Her influential book *The Second Sex* (1949) discusses the issues related to materialism of the first wave feminism. It beckons to the second wave in its recognition of the vast difference between the interests of the two sexes and its assault on men's biological and psychological as well as economic, discrimination against women. Her major argument is that woman is constructed as by men and society. In her view "One is not born a woman but becomes one." She argues that biological sex and social gender are not accidental. Patriarchy controls everything and it establishes inequality between men and women. She proposes that women must take charge of their own choice to establish their subjective identity. They should break

the identity attributed by patriarchy. She advocates socialization among women to establish women's identity. She establishes gender as a social category rather than a biological one. She argues that women are socially conditioned and trained as to assume the role of women. Simon de Beauvoir introduced social constructionist view where gender is determined by social conditioning contexts and structures. This view assigns specific roles to women based on the biological difference. The second wave of feminists differentiates sex and gender. They believe that women may be biologically capable of bearing the children but motherhood and nurturing a child attributed to them. These are actually social values imposed on women in the name of biological acts and functions. Sex is biological but values and norms are imposed with female gender. They argue that sex is biological and natural but gender is about social. In other words feminine and masculine refer to the social norms assigned to male and female in the society. In this context Gayle Rubin says "Sex is sex but what counts as sex is culturally determined and obtained." Thus meanings are attributed to female by socializing process. The socializing process imposes meaning to all the acts practiced by women. Patriarchy or society provide meaning and assign the roles of women. The second wave feminists question it and propose the difference in social performances as natural and unalterable. The woman is forced to accept these social meanings. She is made rather than born as woman.

Elaine Showalter is the most influential critic of the second wave feminism. Her book *A Literature of their Own* (1977) outlines a literary history of women writers. It shows the configuration of their material, psychological and ideological determinants. It promotes feminist critique and gynocritics. Feminist critique means concerned with women readers and gynocritics means concerned with women writers. Fiana Tolan rightly observes the impact of second wave feminism in the following words; he writes "The impact of second wave feminism on literary analysis is so great that it is difficult to recall a pre-feminist criticism".

### **Third Wave Feminism or Post-modern Feminism (around 1990s)**

It is a reaction against the views of second wave of feminism. It gives a broad outlook to feminist theory. It clarifies the contradictions that are present in the second wave feminism. The third wave feminism has multiple concepts in relation to its variants practiced across the world in various countries. It is a term applied to diverse stances of feminism in post modern world. Rebecca Walker coined the term 'third-wave feminism' in her essay in 1992. It focuses on changes in the stereotype depiction of women and language to define women. It takes the view of post structuralism as far as use of language is concerned. Post-structuralist believes that words and texts do not have fixed meanings. There is no self evident relationship between ideas and things or language and the world. In the post structuralist sense, language has been used to create binaries such as male and female. They believe that these binaries are artificial constructs created to maintain the power of dominant groups. Indebted to Post-structuralist view, the third wave feminism argued that men and women are social categories that can only be defined in relation to each other. Post feminists believe that far from being a set of fixed values and roles imposed by society. Gender was a role enacted by individuals. Gender is enacted in social sense and in society. it is accepted by society. They believe that gender is not fixed. The meaning of gender depends on the location, time and cultural frameworks. It is flexible and performs continuously. The meaning is depended on the context.

The third wave of feminism or post feminist theory rejects notions of authenticity, authority and universality. It also rejects objectivity. Post modern feminist believe gender and its meaning depends on location. The meaning of gender is not universal. It believes that meanings of gender are local in nature. Meaning is not fixed because it depends on performances and in relation to performances.

The third wave feminism incorporates views of queer theory, anti-racism, women of color consciousness, post-colonial theory, post-modernism, trans-nationalism, cyber-feminism eco-feminism, transgender, etc. third wave feminists advocate to define feminism for themselves by incorporating their own subjectivity and identity. The meaning of feminism change from generation to generation.

### **Features of Feminism**

Feminist criticism believes that it is an ideological discourse. It is concerned with the feminist reader. It proposes feminist readings of text. It considers the images and stereotypes of women in literature. It reevaluates all the misconceptions about the women.

It is an expression of liberation and emancipation of womanhood from patriarchy. It is a liberating force. It studies the language, social norms and characters in literature from the radical point of view. It questions the male prerogative and patriarchal dominance.

It approaches interpretation and reinterpretation of texts from the women's point of view. It questions the contexts and process of writing. It initiates principles of feminist criticism. It decodes all the questions and answers that have always shadowed the connection between sexuality and textuality, genre and gender etc.

Feminist criticism treats women as writer. It enables them to create experiences and structures of writing. These were viewed from the patriarchal perspective. In this sense, Elaine Showalter advocates feminist criticism should be women-centered, independent and intellectually coherent. It does not mean exclusion of other intellectual tools.

Feminist criticism differs from male centric criticism. It is related to womanhood. It highlights new role of woman and their gender identity. Helen Cixous has proposed that there exists writing which typically characteristically feminine in style and language.

Gender differences are considered very seriously. The gender difference perspective examines how women's location and experience of social situations differ from men. Feminist theorists believe that the different roles assigned to women and men within institutions better explain gender difference including the sexual division of labor in the household. Existential and phenomenological feminists focus on how women have been marginalized and defined as the other in patriarchal societies. Women are thus seen as objects and are denied the opportunity for self-realization.

Gender inequality theories recognize that women's location and experience of social situations are not only different but also unequal to men. Liberal feminists argue that women have the same capacity as men for moral reasoning, but patriarchy, in the name of division of labor, it has historically denied women the opportunity to express and practice this reasoning. Women have been isolated to the private sphere of the household. They are left without a voice in the public sphere. Even after women enter the public sphere, they are still expected to manage the private sphere and take care of household duties and child rearing. Liberal feminists point out that marriage is a site of gender inequality and that women do not benefit from being married as men do. Indeed, married women have higher levels of stress than unmarried women and married men. According to liberal feminists, the sexual division of labor in both the public and private spheres needs to be altered in order for women to achieve equality.

Women are actively oppressed, subordinated, and even abused by men. Power is the key variable in gender oppression. Psychoanalytic feminists attempt to explain power relations between men and women by reformulating Freud's theories of the subconscious and unconscious, human emotions, and childhood development. They feel that conscious calculation cannot fully explain the production and reproduction of patriarchy. Radical feminists argue that being a woman is a positive thing but this is not acknowledged in patriarchal societies where women are oppressed. They identify physical violence as being at

the base of patriarchy. But patriarchy can be defeated if women recognize their own value and strength. Women need to confront oppression critically.

Women's oppression and inequality are a result of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. Exploitation and oppression are frequently practiced as far as gender is concerned. Oppression and inequality is noticed as the variety of variables, including class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. They make the important insight that not all women experience oppression in the same way. White women and black women, for example, face different forms of discrimination in the workplace. Thus, different groups of women come to view the world through a shared standpoint of heterogeneous commonality.

Thus, feminism is not confined to fixities of meaning. It is a female discourse which is not restricted conceptually to only one ideology. It is an emergence out of various ideologies. In literature feminism occupied a significant place in creative writing and criticism. Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Helen Cixous, Juliet Mitchell, Gayatri Spivak and many other feminist thinkers have enriched Feminism with their revolutionary and innovative ideas. New perspectives of feminism have emerged. The above features have illustrated its wide scope, nature and significance of feminist theory. Many theoreticians of feminism invariably focus on these characteristics in their works.

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