

## FEMINISM : A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

Akanksha Srivastava

Assistant Professor, PG Department of Education, PWCIT, Dehradun.

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### Abstract

*Feminism has always been a debatable topic-. Why, how, where it started, who initiated, etc. The perception about the same may be different in different culture but in any case it has been a debatable issue. The present paper puts forth the idea and the perception about feminism.*

**Key words :** *feminism, female, gender*

"Feminism, is a revolt against the traditional concept of feminine which has deprived women of their natural rights and has resulted into inequality and injustice against women."

Feminism is not a new word. Its traces can be dated back to 15<sup>th</sup> century. But now we are in a Post Feminism era and to actually understand the part we have to play as a human being (not as men or women), we really need to open our vistas of knowledge and incorporate in it the How, What, When, Where and Why of this inequality of sexes.

The key sources behind the concept of Feminism as discussed in this article are the issues discussed by the great French writer Simone De Beauvoir and the famous English writer Mary Wollstonecraft in their book 'The Second Sex' and 'A Vindication of The Rights of Women' respectively.

The very basis of oppression and marginalization of women lies in the concept of Patriarchal Society. When man had not stepped into a settled family life, both male and female probably shared all the responsibilities equally. But with women facing certain physical and biological restraints after child birth, men got hold of the responsibility of playing the role of feeder and care taker of the family. Enjoying this position, they declared themselves to be the Head of the family and hence the Law Maker. Women were restrained behind the four walls of the house to perform only the house hold work.

This deprived women of Education, liberty, equality and above all, the right to be considered a human being. Men used all the possible institutions, be it family, religion or society to create rules for restraining the role of women. The literature also played a major role in propagating the picture of an Eternal women (compassionate, ready to sacrifice all her comfort, full of virtues, highly moral in character etc), as it was man who was writing it, reading it and even critically analyzing it. These writings gave the women a status equal to Goddess, described her with utmost importance, praised her beauty and gave her a stature greater than men, thus forcing her to lead a life full of only eternal virtues. A lot of women started believing in this very type of eternal women.

However, virtue cannot be relative to gender; as both men and women were created by God and both have souls, and the same kind of propensity to exercise reason and develop virtue. Women were totally unaware of all this, being deprived of the opportunity to read or write, and hence were declared as a creature with no power to think or reason out things.

The following passage from Simone De Beauvoir's book echoes a similar concern:

*"The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," said Aristotle; "we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolised in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: 'Woman, the relative being ...' And Benda is most positive in his Rapport d'Uriel: 'The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.' And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She 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"*

The author highlights the view that neglect of girls' education is largely to blame for the condition of adult women. Women were treated as subordinate beings who cared only about being attractive, elegant, and meek, and surrendered to oppression as they neither had the tools to know and demand their fundamental rights nor they had the awareness that they are in such a condition. This picture of women was made so deep rooted that women herself digested, absorbed and assimilated this stereotyped image and became a strong and dedicated channel to perpetuate this image through her conduct and through her role as a parent for uncounted number of generations.

As Wollstonecraft puts it-

*"Women are taught that through "cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety," they will marry men who will protect them. And, if she's beautiful, her life will be easy "for, at least, twenty years." The point is that beauty fades as will the protection of her husband if gained under these false pretenses (238). Wollstonecraft believes this is an "imperfect cultivation" and will result on in obtaining "evil" (238) instead of good."*

The main message in the above passage is that changes in education, law, political representation, and general perception of the capacity of women to reason must be implemented. Boys and girls should attend school together, and girls should be privy to the same subjects as boys. Some professions, not just menial ones, should be open for women, who should have a degree of financial independence so that they are not rendered utterly helpless even when they have to carry life all

alone. They should even have some representation in politics so they are not rendered subordinate. All of this follows from the fundamental premise that women too have souls and the ability to reason.

Lack of education and economic dependence was considered by many as the main inertia to women's liberty. But if we talk about women of 21<sup>st</sup> century, even though a good percentage is educated and economically independent to some extent, still the situation is a lamenting one. We have still not understood the true meaning of equality, liberty and economic independence.

Imitating men without using reasoning or without judging the act is certainly not Feminism. Women need not follow men blindly in order to prove their worth. What we have to understand is that both Men and Women have been created equally by god and no one is inferior to the other. We don't have to prove ourselves as men or women but we have to set standards as Human Beings. The wrong interpretation of the word Feminism has misled us. In the name of Feminism we are perpetuating an image of women who is free to do whatever she likes, be it right or wrong. Mass Media is a reflection of society and hence the Daily Soaps too, whether directed by Male Directors or Female Directors, are playing the same role of distorting the women's image as was being done in the past by the predominant literature of those times. In our daily life,

we come across hundreds of such examples where in the name of liberty and equality, women are depicted degrading the basic human virtues. The change required should not be on a superficial level. A massive change in the mind set of both the sexes- men as well as women, is required, that should emanate from reason and complete understanding of the various issues.

As human beings, instead of trying to supersede any other human being, we should focus to conquer our ignorance and self centeredness. We need to rise above the biased attitudes and both men and women should aim to be virtuous. Education will then produce an individual who can choose to lead a virtuous life which is governed by reason.

The attitude needed today for equal development is not of 'Feminism' but of 'Humanism'.

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