

**Feminism, through the Cultural History of the Past to the Present****Jijin J. S.**

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Cultural studies is the study of how cultural practices relate to power and operate through societal norms comprised of race, class differences, thought process, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Developed by British Marxist thinkers in the 1950s, cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field that covers a whole lot of varied topics. In this paper, we try to analyse one of its subtopics, feminism.

**Feminism: The roots**

“Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing the existing power relations between women and men in society” (Weedon)

Feminism that comes under cultural studies is all about enlightenment. It is a revelation, a push from within to react, respond and realise oneself. Even though the word feminism etymologically indicates the womenfolk, it embraces all the downtrodden sections of society. Broadly defined, “feminism as a political ideology can be defined as:

- 1) an effort to make women a self-conscious category
- 2) a force to generate a rational, sensible attitude towards women
- 3) an approach to view the women in their positions,
- 4) an approach to view the women through their perspectives” (Ghosal)

Feminism officially began at the Seneca Falls Convention in the US in 1848. It was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration, which propagated the new ideology and its political implications. Right now, we are through the fourth wave of it, and it is relevant to examine the previous waves to understand it better.

The word feminism was coined by Charles Fourier in 1837 (Goldstein). The first wave of feminism started with the suffrage rights movement of the 1830s. Mary Wollstonecraft, Josephine Butler, Elizabeth Blackwell, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Kit Sojourner Truth etc., were the major figures of the movement. *Vindication of The Rights of Women* (1792) was a groundbreaking work of the feminist era, written by Mary Wollstonecraft.

The second wave started with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which related itself to women's issues in the US agenda. This wave flourished during the 1960s and extended up to the 1980s. This movement was primarily concerned with the Liberation of the feminine folk and their bodily autonomy. It had several combined forthcomings with Marxism, Liberalism, Communism etc. *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet was a notable work of the period. Gloria Steinem, Carol Hanisch, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett etc., were the significant leaders of feminism during this phase.

Third-wave feminism started during the 1990s and was all about consciousness-raising. Proponents like Rebecca Walker, Shannon Liss, Lesley Heywood, Jennifer Drake, Katie Ropih, Naomi wolf etc., argued for heterogeneity. The third wave gave women their choices. They could choose between career and family. The third wave immediately became a big hit, thanks to its all-inclusive ideas of heterogeneity. It spoke about non-white women, too, unlike the first and second waves.

### **Feminism: An all-inclusive ideology**

Feminism, as a movement, has merged with many other social movements and ideologies. It had distinctive varieties of its philosophy. For instance, liberal feminism focused its attention on education. It asked for changes in the social position. It didn't call for revolution; it was based on democratic values. They advocated equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender.

On the other hand, Marxist feminism looked at the racial, class and gender-wise oppression. It called for revolution and the abolishment of the system of private property. Marxist feminism was associated with 'The New Left' movement started by the Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall. Angela Davis, Alexandra Kollonti, and Karol Cariola were notable figures who advocated Marxist feminism.

Fed up with the power play in Marxist feminism, some activists formed the radical feminist movement, insisting on universal civil rights and peace. They viewed institutions like marriage to be implementing a sense of submission to men in women. The contract of marriage establishes men's political rights over women and creates a sense of orderly access by men to women's bodies. Feminism was, as a movement, losing its nature of fighting against the existing systems and gaining momentum by inculcating values of self-actualisation and self-realisation. Rather than attempting to change the surroundings, it began to call for turning into oneself to find one's true potential. They wanted to create a space

outside the male-oriented knowledge and politics: Andrea Dworkin, Catherine Mackinnon, Valerie Solanas, etc., spearheaded this movement.

Another sub-division, Psychoanalytical feminism, also emerged with the view that men have an inherent need to subjugate women. The work that paved the way for this movement was Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), which critiqued Freud's penis envy and lack theory. According to Freud, women are jealous of the male genitals (which is termed penis envy), and men are constantly under threat of being castrated. So, the sight of a woman arouses both love and fear in a man. Feminists spoke against this concept by explaining that womanhood does not depend on the presence or absence of an organ in the body. Instead, femininity is more of a psychological entity.

Ecofeminism examines the relationship between women and the environment. Both have been exploited by patriarchy. Ecofeminism attempts to liberate women and nature and to let them be themselves rather than being subjected to fulfilling male-centred greed. This coinage gained popularity with the efforts of Francois d' Eubonne in 1974. As per the binary system, masculinity has been equated with rationality, objectivity and culture, whereas femininity has been identified with emotions, subjectivity and nature. Males signified the mind, and females, the body. Radical ecofeminists questioned the patriarchal binaries arguing that they are degrading both women and nature. Simultaneously, cultural ecofeminists tried to look at the scenario much more positively, grounding their arguments on pagan worship. According to them, nature has been called 'mother nature, and there is no point in denying that.

Black feminism and Dalit feminism told untold stories of double oppression. A black or Dalit woman has to undergo pressure from her white and male counterparts. Their resurrection from the pitfalls was in no way easy. Cyberfeminism is yet another movement which describes the work of feminists interested in cyberspace and new media technology. The term was coined by Sadie Plant, director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in Britain, in 1994 (Cybernetic culture research unit). Before the advent of cyberfeminism, techno culture was considered masculine. Women remained consumers, and men were the producers. Social activists and professors like Judy Wacjman, Cynthia Cockburn etc., argue that women must come forward to create meaning in cyberspace. Their contribution has been marginalised or has not been recorded in history. They point out that the world needs more technologically advanced, tech-savvy women.

**The Feminism Register**

Now let us examine some exciting terms associated with feminism. Androcentrism is one of the significant concepts related to it. It means the collection of all male-centred experiences in a male-dominated society. Ecriture feminine is another concept, which that feminists argue for. It indicates feminine writing, a term proposed by Helene Cixous, the French feminist, in her famous work ‘Laugh of the Medusa (1975). She argues that women’s language is heterogeneous, diverse and fluid; she has to speak her body’, to construct her world (Cixous et al.)

Elaine Showalter, the American feminist, introduced the concept of Gynocriticism. By this, she means women as writers, in contrast with feminist criticism, which focuses on women as readers and interpreters of male texts. Kimberle Crenshaw, an American advocate, coined the term intersectionality in her book *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (1989). It is defined as a qualitative analytic framework developed in the late 20th century, which identifies how interlocking power systems affect those marginalised in society. Crenshaw defines the term as “a prism for seeing how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other” (Crenshaw).

In the feminist discourse, the idea of gender performativity is worth mentioning. Popularised by the American feminist Judith Butler, the term explains that sex and gender are repeated over time. In the 80s and 90s, a collective feeling emerged that feminism had lost its purpose and led women backwards. Susan Faludi popularised this concept through her term ‘backlash’.

**Feminism: The current scenario**

Now we are through fourth-wave feminism. It began around 2012 and focuses on empowering women, using internet tools and intersectionality. It stands for greater gender equality based on gendered norms and the marginalisation of women in society. The primary focus areas are sexual harassment, body shaming and rape culture, among other issues. A significant highlight is the use of social media to address these concerns.

The standpoint theory proposed by the American thinker Sandra Harding, emerges from this stem, arguing that knowledge forms from the social position. It takes to prove that traditional science and research have paid no heed to women’s issues and feminist ways of thinking. This theory initially took shape from the Marxist idea that the oppressed classes have access to a special kind of knowledge that is not accessible to the privileged class. In

societies stratified by gender and other categories such as race and class, one's social position shapes what one can know. It is easy for those at the top of social hierarchies to lose attention to real human issues like the suffering of the oppressed. Subaltern studies is the expression of such forgotten or lost-sight-of knowledge from the point of view of the marginalised classes.

Cyborg feminism is an exciting development during the fourth wave. It is considered a modified version of cyberfeminism. Cyborg feminism explains how tools can help liberate women. A cyborg is a combination of a mechanism and an organism. The concept is associated with scientist Manfred Clynes, who originally envisaged altering the human body to make it suitable for space travel.

On the contrary, feminists like Donna J Haraway, argue that cyborgs are not our future but our present. They claim that we are already cyborgs. Cyborg feminists even hope that the advent of cybernetics may help challenge gender disparities.

In her seminal work 'A Cyborg Manifesto', Donna Haraway speaks of the history of the relationship between humans and machines. She believes three boundaries were broken, which changed the ideas of culture and nature. The first was between humans and animals. This was broken with the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. It also introduced the concept of evolution to understand human existence better.

The second boundary was between machines and humans, which was broken with the rise of the industrial revolution. Humans began to depend on machines like never before, which made them inseparable from our lives. The third boundary concerns technological advent, which produced invisible mechanical devices that can control aspects of human life. This indicates the overpowering of culture over nature.

To conclude, feminism, as a movement, is not about bringing up oppressed women. It stands for the uplift of all the marginalised sections of society. It includes nature, animals, the queer community and even oppressed men. Despite the many criticisms it incurred, this movement stands tall among all the world's rebellions, which happened from time to time.

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