



# The Achievers Journal

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## Feminism: Issues and Perspectives

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The term 'Feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, the younger, in 1872 in a pamphlet 'L' *Homme-femme*, designate the-then emerging movement for women's rights. It gradually emerged worldwide as a modern movement of woman power and that of her problems and predicaments, challenges and sufferings and her protests against the enslaving society. In India, the movement also witnessed a grand flowering and set a milestone in this historic turn of time in the life of woman.

Feminism is a modern movement of woman power, her problems and predicaments, challenges and sufferings and that of her protests against the enslaving society. But it is true that the history of mankind had been governed by a male-dominated world down the ages. Evidently, man became the law-maker, imposing authority on the 'other' (woman) who followed rules. One enjoyed the limelight while the other remained unseen and obscure. Her world was gradually classified and labelled as strong and weak, male and female, teller and hearer, giver and receiver, culture and nature, high and low, ruler and subject, etc. while living in the same social and cultural background. As a result, one emerged as the centre –force while the other remained marginalized, decentred and unrepresented. Male became fortified and the women were pushed back in the dark and unknown world as a discriminated and tortured gender. It built a differentiating borderline between 'male' and 'female' with discriminating notes of social consciousness, cultural, political, economic and psychological ideas, beliefs and symbols as a woman. Therefore, Elaine Showalter, a feminist thinker calls it as "masculine form" which "is generic, universal, or unmarked, while the feminine form is marked by a suffix or some other variant."<sup>1</sup>

Out of this form of social construct there essentially developed the ideology of the "master-narrator" treating woman as subject in the man's world of representation as the unrepresentable



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creature. Simone de Beauvoir, the foremost feminist, has rightly remarked, “The situation of woman is that she ... a free and autonomous being like all creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.”<sup>2</sup>

The different scholars, thinkers, psychoanalysts and sociologists have the different opinions and their studies show that men are transculturally the more dominant, aggressive and sexually active while women are the more expressive, the more submissive, possessive and nurturant. Even in birds, it has been observed that nest-building and caring of the young ones are the specific biological functions of the female.

Freud, the world-known psycho-analyst, points out femininity as a biological phenomenon and absence of external genitals in a woman arouses in her the feelings of inferiority, a sense of contempt for her own sex and that of envy of man’s greater freedom. Freud thus established women “as weaker in their instincts than men.”<sup>3</sup>

Sociologists believe that the subordination of woman to man had been the history of the so many communities in world. But the process of industrialization has changed the face of woman in society and in the modern scenario and their sex identities are clearly underlined in the world.

*Encyclopaedia of Psychology*, in its comment on sex roles, strikes attention to “increasing equality of woman, sexual emancipation, a lessening of dual moral standards, i.e. in a reduction of all male privileges.”<sup>4</sup>

Apart from it, the feminine character as an artist and as an individual has been beautifully shown by Virginia Woolf who writes: “It is only when we can measure the way of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or the failure.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Marxist ideology, women are twice discriminated against in any class society. But, according to Vrinda Nabar, “in India the discrimination against them (women) would be by and large three fold: sex based (stri-jati), caste-based (jati) and class-based. To be *Caste as Woman* in India is to live out this triple-layered existence.”<sup>6</sup>

As we are not able to draw a dividing line between when winter ends or when the spring begins, but we feel the change of season when it fully blossoms with its warmth, fragrance and temper. Similarly when the women fighting for their freedom since the dawn of civilization in the male-dominated society broke these age-old shackles and fought orthodoxy, superstition and communal separation and proved themselves of extraordinary capacities and projected a free, strong and courageous image of womanhood, it became distinct. Thus feminism emerged neither



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as a fad nor as a legal recognition of woman's civil rights but "as a concept that can encompass both an ideology and movement for socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society."<sup>7</sup>

Feminism has provided a new dimension to the world of woman's identity. It has changed the whole scenario of society. It raises fundamental questions about woman in literature and operates as an interdisciplinary tool for social and cultural analysis as a political practice. It has changed perception of life and literature. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly remarked: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one."<sup>(p7)</sup>

The early feminist did not use the term "Feminism". Had they given any name to themselves, possibly it would have been something like "defenders or advocates of women." The ideas of the early feminists bear the marks of their social and intellectual climate. Early modern Europe was in the process of state formation. Princely rule, rank, and hierarchy co-existed both with the bourgeois modes of life and work and with a developing republican (liberal) ethos. On the other hand, the feminist theory was shaped by the new pressures of society which was created for women. On the other, aristocratic women lost considerable economic, political and cultural power as compared, not only to their feudal forbearers, but to mean of their own class. Simultaneously, a class of women had emerged under a new gender construction of the domestic women of a society. The contents of the early feminist theory reflect the declining power of women in rank and enforced domestication of middle-class women. We can find the feminist traits in the Beguines of the late medieval cities opposing misogyny and male subjection of women. These women sought to live in their own communities and supported themselves collectively. Thus, they tried to escape the two major institutions of male power—the family and the church. This movement, however, did not gain the social acceptance and the state and the church jointly succeeded in crushing it.

In the 1630s and 1650s many of the radical English sects supported religious equality for women. In this climate, there were women who effectively liberated themselves from the male clerical authority. They sought to control their own conscience to preach, and to improve women's educational and economic opportunities. The feminist of 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries brought the dawn of political right and liberty for women, which highlighted rights of the married women to own property and enter contracts, the right of defendants to have women or juries, and the crucial right to vote which came into existence in England in 1918 and in America in 1920.

But Mary Wollstonecraft (1750-1797) and J.S. Mill (1806-73) played a significant role in this crusade of emancipation of women. Mary Wollstone who happen to be the wife of philosopher



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William Godwin and mother-in-law of poet P.B. Shelley, struggled a lot for rights of women and set a milestone in acquiring the identity of women in equality with men. She knew problems of women who were set in an image of female sex. She was highly influenced by the revolutionary ideas of radical writers, artists, philosophers like William Godwin and Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*. She also wrote *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) which initiated a violent response.

J.S. Mill, the son of Utilitarian philosopher, James Mill and author of *The Subjection of Women*, played a vital role in arousing the feminine consciousness by focusing on the potentialities of women as a vigorous force to share any trade as profession. He also accentuated on their rights to vote and their rights to practise arts. He felt the importance of feminism as a tool of Women's progress in society. He believed in the concept of liberty as a necessary means of individual progress.

J.S. Mill held the view that women's position was made unnatural by intervention of political oppression by male dominated society and maintained that masculine dominance made families as a centre of corrupting influence by making boys to be selfish and by making girls an object of exploitation. He also raised the issues of women's suffrage as the second Reform Bill of 1867. Though the motion was defeated in the parliament yet made rays of influence in the subsequent years.

As a result his step-daughter, Helen Taylor, formed *Women's Suffrage Society* in England and persuaded eminent women to join it. He left the ideas of women's education before his death, which provided them an intellectual image in the society which built up the feminine consciousness.

America is the centre for Women's rights which began with The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions in the obscure village, Seneca Falls, New York, in the summer of 1848.

During the next 72 years, the quest for suffrage was found to be the one strong bond uniting three generation of women who believed in Elizabeth Cady Stanton and found that only with the exercise of the franchise, they could eradicate the existing legal economic and social inequalities affecting women.

The period from 1920 to 1960 is known as the period of intermission in the history of women's rights movement when a sense of complacency prevailed. The reality belied the sense of so-called victory on the issue of the suffrage and a New Feminist Movement started in the late 1960.



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It was popular as a period of protest movements: civil rights, peace, the New Left, anti-poverty. But the revival of feminism made people of traditional views who stood aghast and felt that there must be sick, unbalanced women, or bored house wives. They were puzzled about the meaning of “liberation” or “oppression” of such women.

But now it had become clear that women’s liberation was not just a fad and it a serious reform movement. Carden further adds:

The New Feminism is not about the elimination of differences between the sexes, nor even simply the achievements of equal opportunity, it concerns the individual’s right to find out the kind of a person he or she is and to strive to become that person.<sup>8</sup>

The early editions of *The Oxford English Dictionary* defined feminism as a state of being feminine or womanly as did the 1901 edition of *The Dictionary of Philosophy*. By 1906, however, the *Dictionare De Philosophic* defined feminism as a position favourable to the rights of women. The Webster’s Dictionary defines the term “Feminism” as “The principle that women should have political rights equal to those of man,” and “The movement to win such rights for women.”

Feminism emerged as an important force in the western world in the 1960s in support of the same rights and opportunities for women as for men. Feminism has highlighted the realistic scenes of exploitation of woman and has mirrored a history of women’s oppression, the differential behaviour between girls and boys in name of sex, women’s role in children’s books, a victim of male sexual fantasy, anthropological studies of women and political status of women.

Thus, ‘Feminism’ has changed the view of looking at the conditions of woman. It has originated a perception, an idea about the state of woman which confirms, that something is wrong with society in the treatment of women. It highlights the liberation of woman from the chains of oppression in the male-dominated society.



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