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# Historical Analysis of the Development of Feminist Ideology

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The theory and practice of feminism have been one of the most debated subjects of twentieth-century scholarship. The term 'feminism' originated as the French word *feminisme*, at the end of the nineteenth century, spreading to other languages and parts of the world. It generally referred to women's emancipation but quickly developed multiple conflicting meanings. In an international context, in the years before the First World War, feminism had come to connote the support for legal equality and equal opportunity in the labor market for both sexes. Scholars opined that a feminist movement must specifically embrace that identity. In contrast, others acclaimed that any activism by women would be construed as part of a feminist movement (IESBS, 2001; 5469)[1].

The writing of eighteenth-century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) has been considered one of the earliest works calling for equality between the sexes in particular areas of life. Wollstonecraft responded to the eighteenth-century social and political thinkers who did not believe women should have proper education[2]. In Wollstonecraft's times, the idea of feminism did not exist in its present form and spirit; however, in A Vindication, she is concerned with the rights offered to women as an abstract category and does not isolate her argument to only eighteenth–century women or British women. *A Vindication* addresses the issue of the natural rights of women. Wollstonecraft establishes that since God gives natural rights, it is a sin for one segment of

1. For feminist conceptualization see, Humm, Maggie, *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992; Humm, Maggie, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1990, pp. 278; Messer Davidow, Ellen, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*, Duke University Press, Durham N.C, 2002; Hooks, Bell, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center,* Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000.

2. Wollstonecraft was prompted to write *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 after reading Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord's 1791 Report to the French National Assembly, which stated that women should only receive a domestic education.

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society to deny them to the other[3]. Her writings on women's rights were found to align with the development of universal human rights as she argued in favour of applying the ideals of liberty and equality for both men and women[4].

In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft does not claim gender equality using the same arguments or the same language that the feminists used in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, her ideas were revolutionary for her times. She contends for women's rights on the simple principle that if a woman is not groomed by education, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue. Mary Warnock, writing the 'Introduction' of Wollstonecraft's book in 1985, discovers how Rousseau, the father of the French Revolution, was critically evaluated by Wollstonecraft, particularly his views on the 'proper way' to educate women. Wollstonecraft has quoted him extensively[5]. Although the debate about whether Wollstonecraft can be classified as a feminist thinker of the eighteenth century is still unsettled, the well-accepted functional periodization[6] of feminist activism reveals the roots of its first wave in her liberal thoughts articulated in *A Vindication*.

Margaret Fuller and Virginia Woolf were the prominent names associated with developing early feminist thought during the nineteenth century. Margaret Fuller, an American feminist author and educator, born in 1810, initiated a series of seminars for Boston elite women under the title 'Conversations' in 1839. It was an innovative, experimental form of alternative education designed to encourage women to self-express and think independently. On the platform of the 'conversations', the women participated in discussions on philosophy and literature instead of dealing with etiquette and needlework. Fuller argued that women's minds are as sharp and open as men's and that philosophy, history, and thought can also be their domain. Two of Fuller's works shaped the feminist thought of this period profoundly; first, The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men and Woman versus Women, which was an essay published in 1843, and the second was her book titled Woman in the Nineteenth Century, published in 1845. In her book, Fuller provides an interesting analysis of women's role in the history and society of America and presents the idea of women's equality. Her idea of equality between the sexes was based on the conviction that men and women possess masculine and feminine traits. Fuller questioned the concept of separate spheres for men and women, claiming that the soul is sexless and humanity means masculine and feminine

3. Taylor, Barbara, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 105-6; Kelly, Gary, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*, St. Martin's, New York, 1992, p. 107.

4. Mary Warnock's 'Introduction' in *Wollstonecraft Mary, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Mill, John Stuart, The Subjection of Women'*, Dent: London and Melbourne, Everyman's Library, 1985, pp. VII – X.

5. Cited from Mary Warnock's 'Introduction' pp. VII–VIII, Op. cit.; For detailed analysis of Rousseau's expression see, Lange, Lynda, *Feminist Interpretations of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002.

6. For periodization in feminist movement see, Evans, R, *The Feminists,* Croom Helm, London, 1977; Rupp L. J., and V. Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to 1960s*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.

mutually intertwined and complementary. The ideas Margaret Fuller expressed and advocated were considered radical in the context of her times.

Virginia Woolf was an English novelist, born in 1882, and a noted feminist in her thoughts and approach towards the issues faced by society in Victorian times. Woolf wrote extensively on the disparity and challenges women face, especially the limitations on the accessibility of high-grade professions in various fields related to academics, law, medicine, politics, and church. In her novel A Room of One's Own, she establishes that women should have equal rights to a conducive environment to facilitate their progress and scholarship. She wrote that a woman must have money and a room of her own to develop her writings and to unfold their intellectual potential.

During the twentieth century, feminist theory became more nuanced, rich, and varied, encompassing diverse ideas. These ideas originate with certain beliefs, such as that society is patriarchal, structured by men and favoring them, and traditional ways of thinking support the subordination of women and the neglect or trivialization of issues particularly affecting them. It suggested that the patriarchal order should be overthrown and replaced with a system that stresses equality for both sexes (IESBS, 2001; 5485). The diversity of thought within feminist theory lies in the fact that women worldwide differ from each other in many ways, including race, ethnicity, nationality, class, sexual orientation, or educational background. These differences resulted in varying views on feminism and gender equality as expressed in liberal, Marxist-socialist, radical, post-modern, and global feminist theories. Despite all these diversities within feminist theory and several differences among women, there remains the belief that women everywhere share some basic 'sameness' (IESBS, 2001; 5485). This underlies one of the major debates within feminism. Feminist scholars and activists diverge on whether the concept of 'global,' identifying sameness, is more relevant and convenient than the concept of 'local' or 'indigenous, 'identifying differences. Indeed, this debate has a deep connection with the origin and development of women's movements worldwide, identifying the cross–cultural distinctiveness and underlining shifts and change in the very nature of the movement.

The feminist movement across the Globe has been classified into three overlapping waves[7]. The first wave of US feminism is rooted in eighteenth and nineteenth-century liberal thought as articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication*, 1792, Harriet Taylor Mill, *The Enfranchisement of Women*, 1851, and John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1869 in particular. One major development of the first wave was the suffrage movement in the US, demanding the right to participate as equal members of political society. The second wave of feminism realized that suffrage would make women equal to men only if they achieved equal educational, occupational, and professional opportunities. The landmark writings on feminist thought in the second wave include Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, 1949; Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, 1963; Kate Millet's Sexual Politics, 1969; and Judith Butler's Gender Trouble, 1990.

7. For waves in feminist movement see, Krolokke, Charlotte and Anne Scott Sorensen, 'Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls', *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance*, Sage, 2005, p. 24.

Birth control, abortion, and the images of women as sex objects and commodification of their bodies were some of the prominent issues of campaign, struggle, and advocacy during the second wave. However, third-wave feminism is more engaged with the questions of global feminism and sisterhood solidarity. It emphasizes that the feminist movement in the US does not represent the feminism of the world. This third wave in feminism indicated women's differences, including race, class, and national origin. It also triggered debates on the commonalities and differences within and across feminisms. During the third wave, questions about the continental origin of feminism and the debate on the Western base of feminism were a constant theme of debate. The assertion of the Western origin and characteristics of feminism and the claim for an 'indigenous feminism' has been the central theme in the theorizing of feminism in Indian writings, particularly from the decade of the 1990s[8].

Feminist consciousness of this period was defined as the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their conditions of subordination are not natural but socially determined; that they must join their hands with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of the societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self–determination (Lerner, 1993).

The contested relationship between global and local feminism was examined extensively in the scholarship. Whether the feminist movement can be identified as a common movement spread across many regions or several movements that conveniently but inaccurately share the same name, was a major theme of exploration. Deliberation regarding the extent to which women's movement should be understood as a product of national or global influences contained the argument of diverse origin of women's movement cross-nationally. The dilemma and deep skepticism were particularly realized by the women activists of the third-world countries, who believed in the significance of feminism yet experienced discomfort because of the widespread belief that its inspiration, origin, and relevance were bourgeois or Western instead of being national or local, were reported and documented (Basu, 1999). Nonetheless, women who championed women's rights and emancipation instrumentally rejected feminism, considering it narrowly associated with a particular ideology, strategy, and approach. Resistance to feminism as a term reflected the fear that it demands a total transformation of the social order and is potentially transformative of all domains of life, from the way women organize their private lives to their roles in the public sphere (Basu, 1999)[9].

This dilemma related to the acceptance of the movement and rejection of using the term 'feminism' is expressed at a more personal and individual level in some of the writings

8. For debate on 'global' and 'local' feminism see, Bhasin, Kamala and Nighat Said Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1986; Chakravarti Uma, *Rewriting History,* Kali for Women; New Delhi, 2000; Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (ed.), *Feminism in India: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2004; Singh, Maina Chawla. "Feminism in India", *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. Seoul, 30 June 2004, Vol. 10, Iss. 2; 48; Kumar, Radha, (1993), Op. cit.

9. Amrita Basu's "Introduction" in Basu Amrita, (ed.), *Challenges of Local Feminisms; Women's Movement in Global Perspective*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 6-7.

of this period. Madhu Kishwar, in her work, discloses why she 'does not call herself a Feminist' by reflecting on the '*horror ofisms*'. She portrays the difficulty of Indian women activists in positioning themselves as feminists. However, she distinguishes herself from the set–pattern of existing 'feminist groups' in India. This distinction is primarily based on their inability to build any constituency among the wider cross–section of Indian women and their futile efforts to resolve the basic issues crucial to the well-being of the overwhelming majority of Indian women. Her protestations rest with their 'feminist establishment' in terms of the power acquired by them to interpret feminism on behalf of all Indian women and to draw up agendas more specific to their hopes, self-interests, fears, and aspirations than with those of most women (Kishwar, 1999).

While scripting on 'isms' in general, Kishwar has classified them into two categories; the first received a deep bent with time-specification and culture-specification, such as Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, etc., arising from a single movement or a single leader's ideas. The other category may not be as time-specific as the first. However, it is often counted as culture-specific, such as humanism, individualism, and feminism, which does not arise from one movement or an individual leader but often 'pervades many different movements in the form of a structuring idea or tendency,' reinforced by thinkers from many other schools of thought. Her appeal is towards the consideration of 'feminism' as culture-specific, which was an offshoot of individualism and liberalism in Western countries. Since extreme individualism is alien in the Indian context, she has argued that an independent self-image of women's rights workers should be developed with indigenous definitions and terminologies (Kishwar, 1999).

One can trace another related debate within feminism, which examines the genesis of feminist consciousness with distinguished cross-cultural structural conditions, particularly in terms of developed and developing, western and colonial, first world and third world situations. Here, the prevailing discourse rests on the idea that women's movements worldwide are products of modernization and development and assumes sameness in the forms of women's oppression and struggle cross–nationally. In Western situations, changes in patterns of female labor–force participation, increased access to education, and shifts in fertility rates and reproductive roles underlie the emergence of the feminist movement.

Some Western scholars proposed that industrialization and urbanization played a crucial role in the emergence of women's movements, leading to the rise of a larger middle class with access to female education. These changes resulted in role expansion and conflict in society, which became the ground for the evolution of gender–based movement with feminist conception (Chafetz and Dworkin, 1986)[10]. This westernized model of the genesis of feminist movement has been debated and challenged in a few Indian and non–Indian writings, exploring for the local and more rational background for the emergence of feminism.

Feminist movements, particularly in the third world, have appeared alongside the nationalist movements, instead of merely being a by-product of industrialization and urbanization. Indigenous base to the idea, concept, and genesis of feminism, with a foundation

10. See also, Diane Rothbard Margolis, *Women's Movements Around the World: Cross Cultural Comparisons,* Gender and Society 7, No. 3, September 1993, pp. 379-399.

of historical circumstances and nationalist uprisings have been argued by the scholars. National and local conditions produced important material and ideological changes that affected women in colonial countries. The impact of imperialism and Western thought was also perceptible in the significant elements of those historical circumstances (Jayawardena, 1986). The opinion as expressed by traditionalists, political conservatives, and some others, that feminism is a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism and is based on a foreign culture of no relevance to women in the third world, rather it alienates or diverts them from their culture, and that feminist idea has been merely imitative of Western models has been discarded by many of the scholars (Jayawardena, 1986).

In India, the women's movement was radicalized by the activism of poor women, demanding a rise in employment and wages and combating domestic violence (Basu, 1999). Basu states that if feminism is the outcome of a linear process of socio-economic changes, then what explanation can one give for the women's movement being stronger in India than in the more industrialized nations of Russia and Eastern Europe. The extent of state control has much more influence on the growth of women's movement, than on the level of their development. Women's movement tends to be weak where state control permeates civil society and strong where state control has been relaxed (Basu, 1999).

The theory and practice of feminism developed over a long time and in diverse socio-cultural situations. The interrelation between nationalism and the development of feminism in the third world is unique to its origin. Feminism and nationalism were closely interwoven in India. As the nationalist movement gained momentum, the goal of independence became the most pronounced concern for both men and women. The women's movement in India had no man-woman antagonism, at least during the phase of its emergence in the early twentieth century, unlike the dominant characteristics of women's movements in the West.

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