

A Perspective on Modern Feminism.

Dr. S.B. RADHIKA BAI., Academician, Tirupati, Andrapradesh.

Human experience has chiefly been a masculine or, what may be called, a 'malist' experience. Hence the cumulative image humanity offers a tilted, distorted one with the female voice denied an equal force, with the woman remaining behind the areas. She was often considered incomplete without man. Kate Millet maintained that "*Women are not a dependency class who live on surplus.*" (*Sexual Politics*, 62). Even Sophia in her book *Woman Not Inferior to Man* wrote "the worst of us deserve much better treatment than the best of us receive" (62). It is 'a dynamic affirmation of women's newly acquired identifies as whole women'. Women today no longer want to remain a Cinderella, a *La Chingada*, a Madison Avenue's woman. She must change. She must release herself from what Françoise d' Eaubonne calls "feminitude", (*Gyn-Ecology: The Meta Ethics of Radical Feminism*, 53) from her legal, social, and psychological exclusion.

The struggle of women for identity and self-expression, as Susan Bassnett observes, is usually referred to 'as if it were a global phenomenon' (*Feminist Experiences : The Women's Movement in Four Cultures*, 1), but the movement was spread across many different countries and had several variations in emphasis, in tactics and in aims which were peculiar to the culture of the country of their origin. However, what binds these disparate movements together is "...the no-women's land of their female existence" (Susan Bassnett, 13), which intersects the barriers of time and place. Going much beyond the rights issue and employment problems, the Woman's Question gradually acquired the sophisticated and complex label of Feminism.

Today, 'Feminism' is both a concept and a movement. It has undoubtedly enriched the potential of literature and added a new dimension to contemporary thinking, at the same time; it has succeeded in putting male-devised orthodoxies about women's role, nature and capacities in proper perspective.

The term 'feminism' tends to be used for the women's movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality

between women and men. In other words, it is a “social movement that seeks equal rights for women.” (*Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia*, 30). It broadly refers to a philosophy of life that seeks to discover and change the mere subtle and deep seated causes of women’s oppression. The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization by the dominating men of the society relating to women’s subordinate status and oppression. According to Gerda Lerner,

Feminism is not always a movement for it can be a level of consciousness, a staunch attitude, as well as the basis for organized effort. (*The Creation of Patriarchy*, 22).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘feminism’ as “the belief that woman should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state. Thus, it is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed to defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights of woman in education and employment”. So feminists began their work with an attempt at the understanding the true nature of gender inequality by examining women’s social roles and vivid experience. The earlier forms of feminism dealt with white, middle class, educated perspectives alone quite naturally. But later its horizons are widened and its perspectives have become more universal.

‘Feminism’ is an essentially social force. It is more than the effort to “express” “women’s personal experience”, and its “territory” extends far beyond the bonds of family, beyond the lecture hall, beyond academia.” (Kauffman Linda S. 1168). As Maggie Humm observes :

The emergence of feminist ideas and feminist politics depends on the understanding that, in all societies which divide the sexes into differing cultural, economic or political spheres, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place. (*Modern Feminisms* 1).

According to Pam Morris, ‘Feminism’ is

a political perception based on two fundamental premises, first that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and secondly, that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological

necessity but is a result produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. (Literature and Feminism: An Introduction 1).

It may not be perceived that all writing by women shall be necessarily 'feminine' in perspective and values, nor the women-centred novels feminist ones. In this context, it is noteworthy to quote Rosalind Coward who argues, in her incisive essay, *Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels ?* thus : "It is just not possible to say that women-centred writings have necessary relationship to feminism." (230).

It is essential to examine closely the complex interrelationship between the three terms 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist' and what they refer to in order to have a clear understanding of crucial political and theoretical issues of contemporary feminist criticism. The three terms have been used in numerous ways. Toril Moi discusses these terms elaborately and argues that 'feminist' is a political term, 'female' a biological one, and 'feminine' a cultural definition. She says that the words feminist and feminism "are political labels supporting the aims of women's movement of the 1960s." (*The Feminist Reader*, 204). So, feminist criticism and theory acquire relevance in the context of a study of the political, social and personal power relations between the sexes. According to her, feminist criticism is "a specific kind of political discourse : a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature..." (*The Feminist Reader*, 204).

Since the early 1960s of the previous century, British novelists, in general, and women novelists in particular, have been writing in a cultural climate in which feminism has been a central concern in contemporary thinking and works of art. As a protest of the women for recognition and equal rights - which is undoubtedly its simplest form-, it has a long and chequered history. Its genesis can be traced back to 1792, the year of publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary document, *A Vindication of Rights of Women*. This document is considered an early milestone on a long and yet unfinished journey. The arguments about the appropriate role and place of women continued throughout the nineteenth century; despite this clamour, women succeeded in obtaining some legal and financial rights. Women writers in England in the same period accentuated the importance of social life around women and showed it to the world as an important subject matter in literature. Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) and J.S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) are the other

milestones along the path of women's struggle for their emancipation, self-assertion, self-realization and self-definition. Universal suffrage was achieved in Britain in 1928 and women in the twentieth century generally expected to enjoy more independence and wider opportunities. While these belong to the political and economic domain, in the literary field, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and many of her essays, collected under the title *Women and Writing*, provided an open attack on patriarchal society. In her opinion, patriarchal society is the root cause of educational, political, economic and cultural backwardness of women and, further, it stifles and distorts the growth of women's creative, cultural and social dimensions. However, it is Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) that brought about a revolution and a sea change in western society.

Kate Millet, in her influential book, *The Sexual Politics*, says that the "essence of politics is power; and the task of feminist theorists and critics is to expose the male dominance over females." (74). The beliefs that prevail and exist in the society are patriarchal beliefs which form the culture's conscious ideology. In most of the societies, these beliefs are part of the culture's conscious ideology. The term 'Ideology' is also used to refer to the way people perceive 'reality'. In that sense, "feminism" is a consciously held ideology, which opposes the ideologies that maintain the primacy of masculine authority and power. However, feminist study is concerned with the ways in which women's subordination is naturalized, made to seem just the way things are. But a woman writer experiences not only exclusion, but an internalized split in her own oblique relation to the dominant culture and to patriarchal institution. Virginia Woolf puts it very aptly in this way in *A Room of One's Own* : "if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical." (146).

'Feminism' is more concerned about discovering how literature as cultural practice may be involved in producing the meanings and values that lock women into inequality, than representing the existing reality of lives of women in literary texts. In this connection, it is very natural to raise some relevant questions about women's writings. What is the nature of women's writing ? Is there any difference between men's writing and women's writing ? Is there a need for a special language for women? Another way to ask these questions is to explore the extent to which patriarchal representation, by contrast, 'silences' and 'subdues' women - the extent to

which woman or womanhood, considered not as an image but as a sign, becomes the site of contradiction and repression. Thus 'feminist literary criticism' has been developed out of the need to explore and answer these questions. Feminist literary criticism was given a new direction and emphasis by Elaine Showalter in the 1970s who wrote alongside Ellen Moers, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* deserves special mention in this regard. As far as the need for a special language for women is concerned, it does not mean a refusal of language itself or a return to a specifically feminine linguistic domain.

Although there are different schools of feminist writers like liberal feminists, socialist feminists and radical feminists, who differ sharply in their priorities and in their analysis of women's oppression, they share many key concepts. Fundamentally women argue that the world has been explained by men writers and they have largely recorded the representation of women's experiences in the past. And the differences that exist between men's perspective and women's perspective have not been taken into account.

The general climate of the 1960s nourished the women's movement, sometimes indirectly. The 1970s and 80s were distinguished by what has come to be known as the 'Second Wave' feminism. In the 1960s, women in Britain made attempts to identify and express their situation, in the process, reviving the dull realist novel. Women novelists in Britain have an unusually rich tradition of women writings. Jane Austen introduced fine comedy into her moralizing social stories. The Brontes transformed the gothic with dream and female indignation. George Eliot extended realism to include the intellectual life of her time. Virginia Woolf embraced impressionism and experimented with structure. Though such models were almost taken away from women to be subsumed into the 'male stream' of the novel, they (are now being reclaimed to) demonstrate women's range and versatility.

The women writers in England used the novel form to present different attitudes to the potential of fiction. For example, Iris Murdoch, a moral thinker, used novel as a realistic study of human beings and as artfully contrived fabulation. Antonia Byatt combines nineteenth century realism and twentieth century questioning of language to create novels. Margaret Drabble examines the restrictions felt by young mothers, in conventional forms, giving them new validity. Eva Figs adopts the flow of impressionism to explore female sensations, from birth to

old age. Fay Weldon innovates with the punchy paragraphs of copy-writing to mock conventional attitudes to femininity, and suggests ways of escape.

In the late 1960s, the politics of gender entered a new phase and since then, feminist criticism has been developed, debated, institutionalized and diversified as never before. The three revolutionary books of 1970 - Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes* --- were witty, eloquent, wide-ranging, polemical and had given a new impetus and dimension to the politics of liberation. The above-mentioned works along with a host of similar writings tried to define a novel agenda for a new, self-conscious phase of feminist reading. Writing in this phase was a cultural rather than an individual phenomenon and the social context of literature was more than an explanatory 'background'. It appeared that fiction both manifested and influenced the ways in which societies understood themselves and the world. Literature was, in this perspective, profoundly historical.

Mary Wollstonecraft whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792 is considered a feminist manifesto even today. She demanded equal opportunities for women in the field of education, economics and politics. It is a critique on the social and economic systems, which strongly pleaded for women's education and their protection by laws. Arguing that woman should be treated as human beings; Wollstonecraft says,

Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.(*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 82).

Wollstonecraft further argues that woman "was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reasons, he chooses to be amused," she rightly condemns the religious attitude which is responsible for giving secondary position to woman. She also regrets that "taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison." (*A*

Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 131). Thus *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* has provided a sufficient platform for asserting the equal rights for the woman.

John Stuart Mill is a critic whose work *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) is regarded as an important milestone in feminism like Wollstonecraft, he also felt the need for unproved education for women in all spheres and asserted that the power of earning is essential to the dignity of women. He was a true democrat and a champion of freedom, who fought for liberty and individual freedom. He condemned the “domestic slavery” of the woman the attitudes which regulated the existing social relations between the two sexes, the legal subordination of one sex to the other and declared that it is the chief hindrance to human improvement.

In *the Second Sex* Simon De Beauvoir argues that the secondary position of the woman is not imposed of necessity by natural “feminine” characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education which have been under the control of men. Thus the woman is limited to a very few and left a vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. It makes the man to consider himself subject and Absolute and woman as the other:

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 the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other.(The Second Sex 16).

Simon De Beauvoir does not hesitate to taboo-ridden topics like sexual initiation, sexual pleasure for women. She says that woman is not a free agent in choosing the man of her erotic destiny, and her desires and pleasures are at the mercy of an institution and for a long time she has been denied the right to pleasure. As man is never consistent, he wants his wife to be passionate but indifferent to men as a whole. He demands her to be entirely his. She has been betrayed from the day he marries her. Bound to one man, with children to tend, woman's life is over. She finds no future outside of her husband's. Simon De Beauvoir rightly argues that the bond between man and woman should be based on common love and consent. She discusses all issues like the unwanted motherhood, the unmarried mother and abortion to have a clear vision of the reality. She finds out that a prevailed to make her more subservient and vulnerable. Finally Simone de Beauvoir asserts that women that women should be freed from the assert bonds of slavery and they are not weak at all. She acclaims the need for understanding and love in any relationship including.

Kate Millet in the *Sexual Politics* (1969) declares that woman ought to be given equal treatment in society. She points out that the relation between the sexes is basically political as it is an arrangement “whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (23). She argues that the woman is forced to be a homemaker and chattel, and proves that all but rudimentary sexual differences are cultural in origin.

As the issue is a complex one, there are many differences in the ideological viewpoints of the various groups of feminists. The more radical group rejects outright the institution of marriage and considers it as an organized rape whereas the less militant feminists like Betty Friedan want to seek fulfillment within marriage itself. Though they oppose nuclear family system. It is called a "war of the sexes", by James Thurber, an American humanist. The members of the radical group came together against me in the process of “consciousness-raising” rituals and confided to women of the group their adverse experiences at the hands of men. It necessitated the evolution of a new vocabulary, “consciousness raising” which means “making women conscious of their subordinate position to men in the society and questioning this subordination, “male chauvinism” which means the assumption that male needs and capabilities are superior to those of women “sexist” which means to prejudge role by gender, “sex-object” which means a woman seen primarily in terms of sexual attractiveness to men and “full humanity” which means a full human being.” Gloria Steinem gave currency to “Ms.” a new “liberated” form of address which avoids identifying women on the basis of their marital status. Radical feminists advocated a drastic reorganization of society and gender roles apart from demanding equal educational and career opportunities. They declared that they are prepared to take up a revolution which would overthrow the dominance of one half of the world's population over the other on the basis of sex. They gave a clarion to woman to get united to achieve self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-respect. They have developed the concept “sisterhood” to develop friendship among them and asserted their identification with one another.

They want to unite all women - Black or White, working or non-working, of lower or middle-class as a revolt against the patriarchy which divided them. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley noted feminists of today observe that the “concept of sisterhood means much more than sharing work or responsibility. It involves a redefinition of the value and status of personal experience. The personal becomes the political; that is, the nature of women's oppression can be

analyzed through the medium of accounts of private experiences.” (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, 340).

The feminists want to “abolish all differences in dress and demeanor, personal adornment, sexual initiative and the allocation of homemaking and parental duties,” (Isa Kapp 27) and want to lead “the androgynous life” to save themselves from time-wasting frivolity and petty narcissism. But it has to note that the aim of different groups of feminists is the same, i.e. to liberate women from male oppression and to promote women's rights. The radicals demanded that woman must not be a slave to her biological functions and child bearing must be treated as only voluntary. Every woman should have the right to have abortion on demand. They are interested to force the government to treat abortion at par with other forms of medical care so that a poor woman is not denied abortion. Feminists have different opinions regarding prostitution and rape same modern feminist even advocate permissiveness to show that sex is only a fragmentary part of the man woman relationships and it should not be give so much of importance. In spite of these differences all the feminist movements aspire to consider feminism as an “Umbrella movement, a ‘broad church’ that could accommodate every kind of feminism.” (Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson 77).

The contribution of the woman writers for the feminist movement is quite substantial. They began to talk and discuss all the issues related to feminism long before the advent of woman's liberation movement. The list of these writers include such illustrious writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell, Dorothy Richardson, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Drabble and Dorothy Richardson the exponent of the stream of consciousness technique is perhaps the first to feel the need. In *Pilgrimage* she is successful in creating “Feminist prose.” She makes it clear that she has made an attempt to produce a feminine equivalent to the current masculine realism. The feminist prose she created characterized by unpunctuated sentences moving from point to point without formal obstruction.

Women writers today write in the context of increased activity and new possibilities, irrespective of whether or not they are writing for feminist publishers and whether or not they are feminist writers. The contribution of these writers is richly varied. From the perception that for women the sexual life is largely a source of pain and insecurity, women's writing ventures into territory beyond personal emotional distress.

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