

Woman Question, Identity and the Emergence of Feminism

Saimah Bashir Shah

ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir-190006, India.

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ABSTRACT

Human existence is woven with the exegesis of 'gender'. Being human corroborated with the fact of belonging to a particular gender determines the identity and substance of a human being. What follows is a power relationship between 'being human' and 'being a particular gender' with mostly one dominating the other. Defining is the 'gender' a social construct, not 'human' as natural. It is explicitly a tussle of power amid 'nature' and 'culture' or what we call as 'social' that percolates down to all the levels of human existence. The result has been an 'unequal equation' within human relations either with nature or within themselves. As 'Man' and 'Woman' are the two unequal values allied with human beings; so are the definitions associated with both. What is a 'man' and a 'woman'? And what it means to be a 'man' and a 'woman' under different settings and circumstances? The answers are not so intricate to find and perhaps lies in the question itself, what is it that induces us to ask such questions? When nature was appropriate to create human beings as males and females essential and complimentary to each other, who created 'man and woman' the binaries in hierarchy, or to be more precise the 'woman'; for there never came a time when we were induced to ask and define the identity of 'man'. Man is a 'man' and always was, the ultimate human being or the norm. But a 'woman' is a 'woman – a subjective reality' and needed to be defined, as there is more to the etymological and historical meaning of the word 'woman' than the biological meaning of it, that is to be a 'female human being'. Biology is not enough to give answers to the questions that are before us; why is women 'other'? What humanity has made of the human female? These were some of the questions that preoccupied many women and men, and got tendered before us in the form of 'feminism'. The present paper aims to emphasize upon how the identity as a function of thought process with various expressions has determined the existence of women. And how far the 'Woman Question' was dealt in both theory and praxis in different places and periods of time, leading to the emergence of 'feminism'. The methodology adopted is textual analysis and interpretation.

Key words: Women, History, Identity, Subjugation, Feminism, Western, Colonialism, Non-Western

1. Introduction

.....representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women (Butler, 1990:1).

Standing in for someone is an accustomed function of human behavior. This standing in becomes representation when done with an authority. And representation is a contentious issue. What represents us actually defines us and eventually becomes an accepted reality. And this reality around us, in turn leads to the creation of "self-conception" (Marx and Engels, 1976:36). An illustration of it is the assumption of truth about the category of women. Women as an analytical category as part of a universally constituted social group has been paramount to various ideologues and ideologies. The multiple forces acting around leading to the identity formation of women have always been complex and intertwined. And the resultant misogyny became an ultimate obvious expression universally, creating enormous scope and space for a possible critique of the perspective. Thus what becomes a socially constructed identity of women also becomes a relevant issue for anatomy. And the 'woman question' is an evident outcome leading to an enormous theory building complying with the assumptions and actuality about women.

Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity (Freidan, 1977:11). Stretching to the ancient times we have evidences of these misogynic expressions derived from various master sources. Philosophies, epistemologies, politics, and ethics treated woman as an "objectified other". Such a representation rather the misrepresentation remains contentious, moreover claiming the human thought and life for long. With this vagueness also got shaped the byproducts of the human or as such the men's (with their assumed superiority and status) prudence viz. laws, bylaws, knowledge, customs, cultures and even interpretations of religions; resulting in the absence of women from all the corridors determining and defining their lives. Also 'Woman' became 'other' and 'man' the 'ultimate human' or the 'norm'. Thus came the institution of 'patriarchy'.

This ultimate shift of the power to the men's court created imbalance in the sphere of human life. And women got out of the power corridors in all its manifestations. Now,

Everywhere we find that women are excluded from certain crucial economic or political activities, that their roles as wives and mothers are associated with lesser powers and prerogatives than are the roles of men. It seems fair to say then, that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated, although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974: 3).

For long woman have been suppressed as half human, the ultimate dehumanization and a contradiction to her real identity. Her existence became a byproduct of the men's so called prudence and her identity the sexualized one. Most learned men depicted women as the physically and mentally inferior sex, ordained by God and limited by nature to wifely duties, and sometimes caricatured as monsters if they sought knowledge (Freedman, 2007: 10). Thus alienating them from the defining parameters of life. And leaving them entirely to the whims and fancies of men.

With these controlled settings in the environment to grow women became as Mill says, in his *Subjection of Women*, the 'artificial products' (Mill, 2006:26). Reiterating, Simon De Beauvoir, a 19th century feminist says, in her trendsetting book '*The Second Sex*' that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature." Also the 'feminine mystic permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. Thus living, according to the 'feminine mystic' as a suburban housewife' (Friedan, 1977:63, 64).

While the natural was superseded by the social, the derived reality became an artificer of the fates as well. And women is a recipient at the lower hierarchy. This percolation of the hierarchical division had serious repercussions in deviating the natural course of living of a man and a woman with a purpose to fulfill. 'Men develop ideas and systems of explanation by absorbing past knowledge and critiquing and superseding it. Women, ignorant of their own history [do] not know what women before them had thought and taught. So generation after generation, they [struggle] for insights others had already had before them, [resulting] in the constant inventing of the wheel' (Lerner, 1993:227). This pervasiveness of 'patriarchy' together with the internalizing of 'misogyny' led the world to a framework of imbalance. Such is the intensity of it that even today, with lot many feminist battles fought, the balance couldn't somehow be created. And, hence, debating the subject afresh with the emerging diverse contours of the issue is necessitated every day.

2. The 'Woman Question' or 'The Querelles Des Femmes'

Because cultures have elaborated on biological differences to reinforce gender hierarchy, feminists have looked skeptically on theories of natural femininity (Freedman, 2007: xvii).

With naturalizing and normative reinforcing of the sex gender dichotomy and the subsequent condescending or patronizing of the female gender, the consequential resistance had a world to shape or to re-shape. The 'woman question' got highly acclaimed, since the ancient times with more focus in the early modern Europe. The 'woman question' is a phrase that advertently focuses upon women concerns both positively as well as negatively. In the ancient times as in ancient Greece¹, women as a subject got acclaimed in several of the essence writings but mostly with a negative overtone. Here the analysis done by Allen Prudence (born in 1940) is worth noting. Allen says,

As in so many fields in philosophy, the pre-Socratics set the direction of the history of the concept of women by asking the fundamental questions. When the fragments of their writings are examined it becomes clear that their questions fall into four broad categories which can be identified as; opposites, generations, wisdom and virtue. The fundamental questions associated with each category are the following: Are male and female opposite or the same? What are the respective functions of mothering and fathering in generation? Are women and men wise in the same or different ways? Are men and women virtuous in the same or different ways? (Prudence, 1985: 57-75)

¹ Ancient Greece, the civilization in Greece extending from 13th BC to 600 AD, where women had comparatively lesser rights than men.

The characterization of the respective positions taken by different philosophers, as done by Allen is put into three basic theories of sex identity as: 'sex unity', 'sex polarity' and 'sex complementarity'. The first theory holds the belief that both men and women are equal and not significantly different. The second theory represents a complete reverse of the first and believes that men and women are different and also men are superior to women. However, the third theory holds the partial combination of both the two theories and believes that men and women are different but equal. Using this analysis, Allen ascertains various great philosophers, accordingly. According to her, Plato with the gender neutral position he adopts by emphasizing upon 'soul' rather than the 'body' while allowing for the political sophistications of the guardian class, can be pertinently called as the founder of the 'sex-unity position'. While as Aristotle (384-322 BC), whose biological theories led him to believe that woman is half man and therefore inferior to him, represents the 'sex-polarity position'. And both the philosophers influenced others as well. For the 'sex-complementarity theory', Allen regards Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a 12th century German writer and philosopher, as an apt representative. But for Allen it is the Aristotelian view that had the greatest influence in particular. According to Aristotle, "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities." Following him, although with some modifications, his influence could be seen while analysing the specifications regarding women question subsequently. As Thomas Aquinas treated women as 'imperfect man' or an 'incidental being'. The leaning continued and more characterizations came with more or less the analogous underpinnings from different philosophers that includes, Kant (1724-1804), Hegel (1770-1831), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Rousseau (1712-1778) and Nietzsche (1844-1900). All these philosophers represent a general belief in the inferiority of women. However when we talk about Utilitarian's we find an exception to this general trend. 'The Utilitarian's, like Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and J.S Mill (1806-73), supported the cause of women's enfranchisement and regarded 'this one-half of the human race' as morally equal to men' (Ellen, Kennedy and Susan, 1987: 9).

With the change in the general outlook of life due to the emergence of the age of 'Enlightenment', a wider change with regard to the thoughts about women could also be felt. At least at the theoretical grounds of which, the Utilitarian's as mentioned above, form an obvious example. This change later on made the beginning of a new era of demands and expectations of the women. Both men and women contributed to the debates over the 'woman question' in early modern Europe (Freedman, 2007: 10). This time with a necessary shift in the overtone for more positive and significant interventions. The voices later transformed the various ways of looking at the problem and the contributions were manifold. With its inception what was considered as normal began to be contested and the debate around it began. The contestations extended far beyond the perceptible things, with various characterizations like De La Berre's the 'mind has no sex' (On the Equality of Two Sexes 1673) or Beauvoir's dictum 'biology is not destiny'. Thus emerged a new wave with the affirmatives associated with and from the 'woman question' to the emergence of 'feminism'. And history is witness to the fact that how far these contestations went and how far they reached. Nevertheless, the 'woman question' and the subsequent emergence of feminism brought the world to a new critical spectrum.

The hierarchy between the binary man and woman began to be challenged. Gender like all other units of social reality, became an important unit of analysis. With this began the perceptible change about the domain of creation. And world in entirety began to be looked upon differently with an additional perspective of the women. Also with this realization and the subsequent changes, new laws, new epistemologies concerning the lives of women were ordained. The process gradually spread across the world, thus challenging the respective forms and dynamics of patriarchy.

As patriarchy defined has explored all the possible ways of taking roots into the very fabric of the society. With the institution of patriarchy either based on social, ideological or biological grounds, a critical evaluation of all demanded a holistic approach. Patriarchy, so deeply entrenched in the society, is a systematically structured and institutionalised way of life by means of customs, traditions, as well as the laws. Even the construction of concepts like 'masculinity and 'femininity', representing stereotyped patterns, different personality traits and behavioral tendencies of men and women. As Sylvia Walby in her 'Theorising Patriarchy' (1930) defines patriarchy as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men, dominate, oppress and exploit women.' This male and female characterization coupled with the institutionalization of both, posed a severe challenge to any proposed critique of it. Thus leading to a severe battle for the feminists to fight for.

The characterizations as defined distorted the reality of both man and woman being equal and complimentary to each other. When man became the master and women were left to be the 'subject of man' there started the ambit of struggle for power leading to the emergence of a political relationship between them. While as there is an existential meaning to both, however, equality and essence became a mere rhetoric with time. The issues of the identity and existence of women found a true representation only with the emergence of feminism as a force of change. And the 'woman question' became the subject of feminism. Though the issue was at core in different writings of thinkers in varying periods of history but only of a little significance for women.

3. Roots of Feminism: Western and Eastern

Feminism, as we have seen, in spite of having some shared concerns is not a monolithic doctrine. It has evolved historically in response to the disadvantaged placement of women in a society, dynamically and diversely depending upon the context in terms of time, space, the objective conditions and also the responding aspirations of the women in a given situation. Post-Renaissance Enlightenment and the growth of the liberal consciousness in Europe since 17th century were instrumental in releasing the emancipatory forces. And these changes began to have a positive bearing on the gender relationship as well, both at the level of the concept and practice. It was in this context feminist consciousness and feminism as a movement began to emerge and gain ground at around 19th century.

While Feminism as a term is recent and was coined in the 19th century, but its intellectual history goes back over a long time. Finding an essence or giving an expression to their lives, women found it convenient to make use of all the available and most impactful frameworks like religion, education, economic independence and political representation, in order to widen the spheres of their lives. Almost as early as in 12th century, women like Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century writer and composer, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), a 15th century Englishwoman and Margery Kempe (1373-1438) again an Englishwoman, made use of religious frameworks while speaking out for themselves and their sex (Walter, 2005:6-7). Similarly as in India, almost as early as 16th century, the Bhakti movement became a solace for some Hindu women. Breaking stereotypes and challenging the monopoly of patriarchy became one of the goals of these women, and the religious practices an escape from the harshest intricacies of their society. Among them pertinent is the mention of Meerabai, a mystic saint of Bhakti movement in India. She lived the life of a mystic, thereby breaking the set rules that marked the lives of Hindu Indian women of that time (Kumkum, 1990:27). Similarly, a mention can be made of Lal Ded, a 14th century Kashmiri mystic and another exemplary of breaking the traditions of stereotyping about the life of Kashmiri women of her time. She stood for attaining the higher spiritual merits considered unsuitable for women of that time (Raina, 1973:3-4). Qasim Amin (1863-1908), known as the father of Egyptian feminist movement, is one of the most influential feminists of the 19th century. Qasim Amin, a jurist, reformer and philosopher, was the first one to initiate the debate regarding the status of women within Islamic cultures and the examination of it in the light of the Islamic principles. He questioned all those practices like female seclusion, veiling, and the practice of polygamy, which he thought were against the women's self-identity and development. Amin is famous for his masterpiece '*Tahir al Mara*' (*The Liberation of Women*) written in 1899. Amin also published '*The New Women*' in 1900 (Freedman, 2007:145).

Renaissance or the period of Enlightenment proved pragmatic to a greater extent for women globally and enabled many women to receive education. Thus began the movement of education for women with a bearing upon expanding the domain of their freedoms. Education also brought to the fore numerous exceptionally good women writers, even though with the reluctance and non-acceptance from the society, specifically when they wrote something challenging the status quo. Despite these hardships some women wrote and published as well, pertinent among them is the mention of; Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), Duchess of New Castle, who wrote articulately against the deep-seated ill will in the society for the women who dared to speak out ambitiously; Mary Astell (1666-1731), an early English feminist and writer, exploring the ideas about women development by stating the reasons of their inadequate development. For Astell, what was lacking in women was the proper training and education, otherwise they had all the capacities that men had.; Li Ju- Chen (1763-1830), an 18th century Chinese feminist wrote fiction and questioned all the anti-women practices that were prevalent in Chinese society that time. Her protest comprised a unique style of making a male character to survive the predicaments of a woman's life. Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791), Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), emerged as authoritative voices of women, emphasizing more upon the requisite of providing adequate training and education to women. While issuing a declaration regarding the rights of women, Olympe de Gouges, highlighted how women are

discriminated when their rights are concerned not when they are tried for a crime. Thus making a case of the argument for an equitable treatment of women(Walter, 2005: 20-34).

Appearing first as a demand for education of women under the rubric of the liberal individual ideology, feminism gradually began to develop taking wider aspects within its ambit. The demands for education for women began to be raised at wider levels by women like Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964). However, for such demands were made and justified only with the benefits that society would accrue by accepting and imparting equal education to women. Self-development of women was still a distant dream, for such demands were still considered to be revolutionary. With such difficulties faced it were women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), who revolutionized the demand for education while taking it to the level of developing women as competent human beings(Freedman, 2007: 57). Similarly, Kishida Toshiko (1863-1901), an 18th century Japanese feminist, through her unique and symbolic analysis presented the way women were subjected to various discriminatory practices in Japan., what she calls as daughters in Japan are kept in boxes, as they have hands, feet and voice- but all this is of no use to them, since they are restricted. She also stressed upon how women can play a crucial role in changing the society as mothers (Ibid.:99). Inspired by Wollstonecraft, Francisca Diniz, a 19th century Brazilian feminist, began working for women and started a journal named '*The Female sex*' in 1873. Through this journal she began advocating in support of the emancipatory demands which included education and property right for the women in Brazil(Ibid.:112).

Apart from some earlier men and women social reformers in India, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy(1772-1833) whose great efforts and fight against the vicious anti-women practices like 'Sati', is significant, some important early feminists there includes Rukeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), a Bengali writer. Rukeya wrote to advocate for the rights of women. Her short story '*Sultana's Dream*' published in 1905, is one such finest pieces advocating her ideas regarding women's abilities, wisdom and intelligence, to handle all sorts of situations if only they are given the required education, training and opportunities(Ibid.:153).

The trend continued and there were many more women and few men also, who took the lead and contributed to the development of feminism. Some of those includes, Qui Jin (1875-1907) of China, who wrote, '*Stone of the Jingwei Bird*' in 1905-07. Shareefa Hamid Ali, a 20th century Indian feminist who wrote, '*East and West in Cooperation*' in 1935. Similarly Ding Ling (1904-86) of China, Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) of Egypt and many more belonging to different parts of the world, who lived their lives for the cause of women. Huda Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Movement in 1923(165-243). Similarly, the mention needs to be made of the 'Iranian women's Movement' which started during early 20th century and fought for the rights of women in Iran. Thus, it can be said that "over the centuries, and in many different countries, women have spoken out for their sex, and articulated, in different ways, their complaints, their needs, and their hopes."(Walter, 2005: 2) The emergence of such revolutionary demands started an era for women's development and gave way to further demands and claims, like their representation in politics. Thus became 'feminism' a wider discourse and movement.

4. Trends in Feminism

When the liberatory voices widened and scattered, the impact became obvious. Feminism with time got diverse, becoming multifold gradually. A new wave of diversity emerged in feminism. While the early feminists inspired by the liberal ideology paved way for certain developments; there came to the fore a new ambit of influence with more radical contestations. Feminism began to be influenced by Marxism and Socialism as well. From demands for education, vote and political representation, more fundamental questions began to be asked. The questions rooted in bare facts that had over time played an important part in subordinating women. Thus a radical discourse of feminism began; with the fundamental questions like what is woman? What constitutes the category of women? Is it a social or a biological construct? What role does biology play in subordinating the women?

With these overarching contestations a wave of theorization also began to be unfolding. From philosophizing the discourse to the new epistemological developments, feminism became wide and deep, penetrating to the contextual theory of knowledge. Also with this began the universality of theorization with the rhetoric's like 'sisterhood is global' by R. Morgan. However when the politics of knowledge surfaced in feminism too, a new wave of diversity emerged. The mere rhetoric's like 'sisterhood is global' began to be contested. Also with the historical facts of colonialism and racism, an unequal power equation had already been there between the White Western women and

the Women of Color. Thus came a point of departure with the diversity of enrichment of perspectives to feminism. Certain departures like race, color and region began to be determining, giving birth to various alternative discourses of feminism.

When mainstream Western feminism failed to acknowledge the diversity among women. The relationship between the white western and other feminists became adversarial. During 1970's and 80's the thematic question of feminism about being women in different settings, began to be understood while contesting the rhetoric of sisterhood is global. During and after this decade a wide range of feminists with oppositional consciousness and differential feminist orientations emerged. These feminists emerged under the rubric of diverse and emerging feminist strands like, Black feminism, Third World feminism or Post-Colonial feminism; with the basic purpose being to challenge what the post-colonial feminists theorists like, Gayatri Spivak characterises as 'Hegemonic feminist theory', what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls as 'Western feminism' and what Black feminists Amos and Parmer call as 'Imperial feminism'.

Besides, the postmodernist conjectures of feminism, complying with the influence of post-structuralist perspective, also began to forge in. While challenging the traditional notions of feminism, the focus of postmodern feminism has been upon pluralism and difference. It has gained considerable prominence scuttling the Liberal and Marxist notions of feminism. Judith Butler, the prominent among post-modern feminists, looks at gender as a discursive construction and performance rather than a biological fact. Also the postmodern feminist's challenges the category of women as a universal construct with shared common experiences of oppression emphasizing upon the diversity characterizing their lives. With it the overarching technological underpinnings in human life have raised issues of the possible malleability of gender in electronic spaces, forming an important intervening juncture for the post-modern feminists like Donna Haraway. For Haraway, gender becomes fluid with the increasing high technology culture. This malleability of gender can be explained under the purview of the growing indefinite boundaries between human and animal, animal and machine, or human and machine as an inevitability of the growing high technology culture, with the possible influence upon the intricacies and stability of the hierarchical dualisms like man and woman.

5. Conclusion

With the near universality of the oppression of women, a universal response became inevitable. This timeless enigma circumscribed not just the practicable but also the theoretical paradigms. And 'feminism' emerged as a true force of change. It was nurtured, accepted, and developed everywhere in the world in different ways and means. While making an analysis of its inception as a movement furthering the cause of women and as a philosophical discourse deliberating pragmatically upon the 'woman question', it can be argued that it got shaped and structured universally. Considering Gerda Lerner's argument whereby feminism is treated as a perspective challenging the repressive patriarchal setup, it opens up the possibility of exploring the history of feminism since ancient times and to different places, in the individual resistant voices across the world. Thus feminism is more than a Western discourse, enriched by a lot many individual and collective authoritatively resistant voices from different parts of the world.

However, with the increasing diversification and the possible overreach of the phenomenon, feminism has been critiqued of being a mere 'jargon' or highly 'pejorative'. Most women shy away from calling themselves as feminists. The 'implicit struggle or politics of power' makes it more contestable. And the contentions also surround the production, decimation, and politics of knowledge with respect to the general, particular epistemologies and respective dichotomies as man-woman, white western women-women of color etc. This percolation or division characterized the future trajectory of feminism. However the breakthrough has been the feminist groundwork instrumental in releasing the emancipatory forces creating an environment for the claims justified. From claims for civil, legal rights to the specific social roles and associated problems including a deeper analytical look into the reproductive roles of women, also with the explorations on race, culture with specifics as 'double colonization' (perpetrated by both patriarchy as well as colonialism), began to be analysed. With time the meanings associated became complex intertwined, as feminism gradually moved into different terrains. The recent has been the post-modern inclinations with a 'linguistic turn' for a more fluid and indeterminate understanding of gender. And this fight for the identity of women continues in the world where the manifestations of women subordination change every day.

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