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**Lesson Developer: Pushpa Kumari**

**College: Miranda House, University of Delhi**



# Traditions in Political Theory: Feminism

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### Traditions in Political Theory : Feminism

## Traditions in Political Theory: Feminism

The new critical insight such as feminism has expanded the horizon of our understanding in political science. It offers crucial reflections and new ways of looking and making sense of the world around us. It can be observed that such developments have contributed to further evolution of the discipline by making it more inclusive, accommodative and open to new ideas and interpretations.

Discourses such as feminism and postmodernism carry great emancipatory potential and have redefined the notion of freedom itself. Whereas feminist endeavours have radically changed the lives of millions of women, postmodernism has unleashed a new spirit to question the conventional ways of understanding and revealing that there can be multiplicity of truths. The dominant universalistic views as projected by white male, Christian, industrial class has been negated. These critical perspectives can lead the effort to dismantle conventional hierarchies and conceptualise a more plural and equal world.

### Introduction :

Women all over the world face inequality, subordination, and secondary status compared to men. This subjugation very often results in the oppression, marginalization and exploitation of women that are characteristic feature of patriarchal societies. Patriarchy is a social system marked by the rule of father or the eldest male member on the family and property. It establishes male as the chief authority within the family and society thus privileging them in all arena of life. At the same time it disadvantages the women relegating them to the secondary status and making them dependent on men in all possible ways. The institution of patriarchy has thrived since long time in history and has percolated to all societal structures and mechanism consequently reproducing the male dominance and hegemony.

Feminists believe patriarchy to be the prime cause of misery of women's lives. Consequently, they have challenged this unjust and exploitative system. Feminism is an ideology as well as a movement. As an ideology it believes and advocates equality between men and women in all spheres of life. As a movement, it defies such oppressive system by protesting and rejecting the patriarchal constructs of the society and demands parity

**Feminism** is a movement as well an ideology that represents efforts to achieve the objective of equality, dignity, rights, emancipation and empowerment of women by adopting various creative ways and means.

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However, feminism cannot be seen as neatly packed coherent philosophy as it has many streams representing different approaches, orientations and aims. The fundamental idea that binds all streams together is elimination of patriarchy and gender justice. Whilst feminists are united in their concern for liberating women they adopt diverse theoretical positions for diagnosing these injustices and thus different prescriptions of what needs to be done to create a more equal society.<sup>1</sup>

### Origin and Development :

Even though the woman question has always been there, but feminism as a separate, serious intellectual endeavour has been recent in origin. It is paradoxical that all the canonical texts produced by leading philosophers and theorists have always deliberately dismissed the women, her role and relevance.<sup>2</sup> It would not be farfetched to describe the history of political philosophy and theory as a male bastion that never allowed women to be part of the mainstream, thus debunking them all together. From the time of Aristotle's *Politics* to *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls, political scholarship has been highly limited for women. Despite this resistance, societies at different point of time have produced women with iron will of defiance and dissension that later on altered the history itself.

Generally the history of feminism is analysed by categorising it into many successive waves that correspond to certain basic tenets and objectives.

### First Wave of Feminism :

The first wave of classical liberalism focused primarily on the discourse of rights. Suffrage movement encapsulated the demand for female enfranchisement and extension of political and civil rights explicit in the works of feminists, such as Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Sylvia and Christabel Pankhurst, Mary Wollstonecraft, J. S. Mill, Harriet Taylor, Margaret Fuller, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton etc.

**The First wave** is represented by the liberal feminism of late 19th and early 20th centuries. The **Second wave** is seen from 1960 onwards. **Third wave** of feminism is represented by diverse modes of thoughts and expressions developed specially after 1990s.

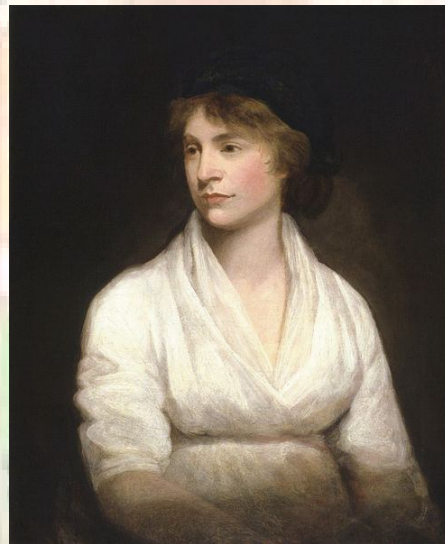
<sup>1</sup> Farrelly, Colin (2004), *Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory*, sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.

<sup>2</sup> Historical writings by eminent scholars display the belief that nature has created women such as she is best suitable and capable of reproduction and caring the family and the household. Examples could be the writings of Aristotle who excluded women from political activity, Rousseau who supported women' exclusion from citizenship, Nietzsche who ridiculed the notion of equal rights of women, Sigmund Freud etc.

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The visible assertion of women's rights can be traced back to the 17th century and effects of French revolution. The historic landmark has been the publication of *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft. Such is the historical significance of this writing that it has been revered as the feminist declaration of independence. Implying similar lines of arguments used by philosophers of enlightenment Wollstonecraft produced first systematic account of women's rights and freedom. She questioned the exclusion of women from the citizenship rights and fiercely advocated similar and equal rights for men and women both. This initiated prolific writings from many feminists of that time who started asserting equal rational potential of women and men.

**Mary Wollstone Craft**



**Figure : 1**

Source : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Marywollstonecraft.jpg>

**Sojourner Truth**

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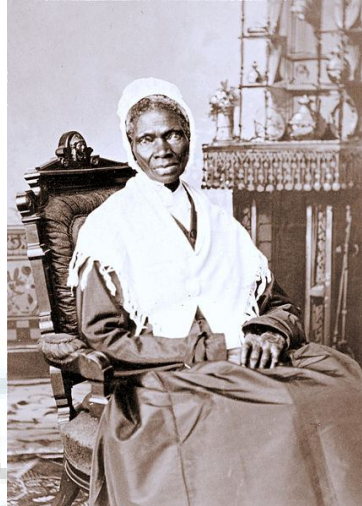


Figure : 2

Source : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sojourner\\_truth\\_c1870.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sojourner_truth_c1870.jpg)

The feminists of first wave believed that attaining franchise rights will end all the problems. They thought that slowly and gradually women will be able to enjoy equal status leading to elimination of all discrimination and prejudices against women. To their distress, they realised that nothing of that sort happened. Mere extension of rights was not sufficient for women's emancipation. In fact, the dissatisfaction and disgruntlement made them desperate. This dismay was best captured in Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* (1963). Thus, emerged Second wave of feminism denoting its resurgence after the period of stagnancy from 1920 to 1960.

### Second wave of Feminism :

Cardinal works that defined the thrust of this period are Shulamith Firestone *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Germaine Greer *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Kate Millet *The Sexual Politics* (1970), Eva Figes's "*Patriarchal Attitudes*" (1970), Andrea Dworkin *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979), Mary Daly *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) . The second wave focused the personal, psychological and sexual aspects of female oppression.<sup>3</sup> Radical feminist focused on sexuality and violence against women. The notion of female supremacism, the moral superiority of women, the value of sisterhood, political lesbianism and separatism from men were displayed in all these writings.<sup>4</sup> All institutions including family were identified as potential sites of sexual oppression for women.

### Third wave of Feminism :

<sup>3</sup> Heywood, Andrew (1992). *Political Ideologies*, Palgrave; Macmillan, pp. 262.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent, Andrew, (1992) *Modern Political Ideologies*, Blackwell publishing, p. 200



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Recent times have witnessed the fragmentation of women's movement. There are newer assertions coming from different quarters. Several autonomous women's movements have come up. These are characterised as Third wave of feminism generally believed to have emerged from 1990s and continuing till present. In a way it also highlights the perceived failures and boundedness of the earlier phases. The third wave stands for reckoning plurality based on colour, ethnicity, nationality, religion, culture among women and recognising the role of these identities in their lives. Additionally third wave feminists believe in celebrating sexuality in a positive way, in contrast to the second wave radical feminists.<sup>5</sup> Important issues addressed by this phase are reproductive rights, sexual violence and sexual harassment in workplace, rape, unfair maternity leave policies, and support for single mothers etc.

There is a dominant misconception about feminism that it is western in origin. Such line of argument is often taken by reactionary and conservative groups who contend that ethos of feminism are antithetical to our culture and sensibilities. After a close analysis we find that all societies have their own legacies of assertion of equality by women and other subaltern groups.<sup>6</sup> Though substantial literature in this field comes from western feminist scholars, however, notable feminist accounts have been produced by scholars in post colonial societies. The genealogy of feminist struggles may vary in content and context, but adjoining all of them is the women's quest for emancipation.

### Approaches in Feminist Studies<sup>7</sup>

#### Liberal Feminism :

This school of thought has primarily employed the framework of rights, mainly the political and civil rights to demand gender justice. The first wave of feminists has been liberals. Applying the logistics of enlightenment and inspired by French Revolution, liberal feminist scholars stressed upon the idea of equality of men and women. The philosophy of individualism and rationalism enabled them to project women as independent and autonomous individual having her own identity and interests. Till that time, women were never recognised as separate being, capable of judgement and making choices. Always treated as dependent on her male counterpart, rarely women of

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<sup>5</sup> Third wave also denotes the freedom of artistic expression. Awareness about female sexuality were carried out by programmes such as The Vaginal Monologue. Many feminist who were earlier against pornography changed their stand under the influence of third wave stating such issues as individual's sexual choice.

<sup>6</sup> The term Subaltern refers to those sections of society that have been marginalized and have not been part of the mainstream for example women, dalits, adivasis etc.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Jaggar in her work *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983) provides wonderful overview of feminist history and its main stains of thoughts- Liberal, Marxist, Socialist and Radical. She also accounts for their strengths and weaknesses

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that time enjoyed any liberty to express herself or to follow her vocation. Society imposed upon her such norms that curtailed her freedom and restricted her mobility. Intellectual developments have always dismissed the women's question as if she never existed. At the best women were recognised in their role as good wives, mothers, daughters etc. All the time carrying out other's command women have never been allowed to decide for themselves.

It was against this frustrating existence that some women dared to imagine beyond their time. In France, women's participation in the French Revolution helped them to think about their problems and prospects in the society. Liberal feminists viewed political rights, especially the right to vote as viable way to uplift their status in the society. Therefore, the entire focus was on the suffrage movement resulting in granting of franchise rights to women, which is identified as the greatest accomplishment of liberal feminists.

**Liberal Feminism** exclusively worked in the frame work of individual rights, basically the civil and political rights. There vigorous efforts resulted in the historic achievement of female enfranchisement that opened the gate subsequently to other avenues of women's empowerment.

Different women's group in United States of America and United Kingdom diligently mobilised and struggled to achieve this objective. The **Seneca Falls Convention** (1848) was the earliest women's rights convention. It passed a list of resolutions for social, civil and moral rights of women. The Declaration of Independence adopted in Seneca Falls served as foundation of Suffrage Movements. In USA, the suffrage movement aligned itself with the civil rights movement and women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony have played crucial role in this regard. The culmination was US Constitution granting right to vote to American Women in 1920.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly in UK Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel have been central in leading the suffrage movement. The right to vote was extended to women in 1918 there though partially, later on fully after a decade. Mary Wollstonecraft strongly advocated for education for women to make them psychologically independent as indicated in her book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787).

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<sup>8</sup> The first country in the world to grant suffrage was New Zealand (1894) shortly followed by Australia. By 1914 Finland and Norway has enfranchised their women. USA and Britain did the same by 1920 and 1928 respectively.



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However the limitation of the liberal feminism has been that it basically aimed for educational, legal and political reforms that would produce women as good companions, wives and mothers. Its strategy basically has been reformist. Also, too much demand from the state has the hidden risk of increased dependence on the patriarchal structure. As such liberal feminism failed to fully address the root cause of gender inequality.

### **Marxist Feminism :**

This school of thought derives from the class analysis of Karl Marx and Frederick Engel's by attacking the institution of private property and capitalist mode of production. In his work *The Origin of Family, Property and the State* (1884) Engel's elaborates on how physical and sexual labour of women has been appropriated for reproductive and care taking functions of private property and the family. The subordination and suppression of women are not natural but made to appear so in order to cater to patriarchy. The emergence of the institution of private property pushes women to the darkness of un-recognition, establishing capitalism and ownership in the hands of men. He refers this as 'the final defeat of female sex' in history. From then onwards, all society have been made patrilineal, property flowing from fathers to the sons. However, radical feminists criticise Marxist feminist due to their omission of other vital categories of gender analysis like race, ethnicity, sexual orientations that are equally responsible repressive structures.

**Marxist feminists** think class exploitation under capitalism is the root cause of women's oppression. It calls for a revolution and overthrow of capitalist order to achieve freedom of women.

### **Socialist Feminism :**

Socialist feminists feel that traditional Marxism is stuck with the complexity of class analysis which is gender blind. They suggest that Marxist class analysis can be supplemented by a feminist division of labour analysis. Alison Jaggar and Iris Marion Young applied Marxist categories like labour and economic structures to address the question of gender inequality. They find economic dependence of women on men as main cause of their subordination. Resultantly, they call for social and economic equality and financial independence of women. For them, motherhood and bondage of domesticity is liable for women's servile status.

Women all over the world engage in unpaid domestic labour yielding to the capitalist economy, neither being recognised nor rewarded. Instead, she is slapped with

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subjugation and state of perpetual dependence and decadence. The traditional family structure, based on sexual division of labour enables men to work for the capitalist economy while all his needs and interests are well taken care of by his wife. Socialist feminist like Charlotte Perkins Gilman advises for professionalization of domestic work as a solution to women's woes.

Feminists like Gerda Lerner, Juliet Mitchell and others believe that women must be emancipated from their biological dispositions along with necessary changes in society and economy. Mitchell emphasised the fact that women's status and function were jointly determined by her role in production and reproduction and socialisation on children and sexuality. Lerner believes that domination of women by men is neither natural nor biological but is historical and therefore can be ended by historical process. Maria Mies, Zillah Eisenstein argue against the nexus of capitalism and patriarchy. The subordination of women in family is part of the economic foundation of society, serving both men and capitalism.

### **Radical Feminism :**

Radical feminism that mostly arose from second wave feminism of 1960s greatly expanded our understanding of gender analysis. It developed profound critique of patriarchy by analysing power differentials and sexuality.

**Radical feminists** outlined sexual oppression and violence against women as the dominant causes of women's subordination and deprivation. Reproductive responsibilities and motherhood were seen as holding women in perpetual captivity.

Emergence of radical feminism in late 1960s and early 1970s had a profound influence on how politics is defined by political scientists, as well as more diffuse effect on cultural values throughout the western world. The leading spark was provided by Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* (1949) through her seminal statement that women are not born but made. This text offered radical understanding of gender, much before this concept became fundamental to understanding of gender oppression. It inspired a range of literature that offered comprehensive critique of patriarchy. Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* explores the role of patriarchal violence, dominance and power in moulding sexual relations. She sees politics not as innocent but as mediated by power relations and hierarchy that operates everywhere. By implying examples from different religion she shows how it plays predominant role in establishing and sustaining the hegemony of males and inferiority of females. She believes that women, who comprise half of humanity, can change the value system by change in consciousness.

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In the *Dialectics of Sex* Shulamith Firestone (1972) traces the biological root of patriarchy in reproduction, child rearing. Such roles act as deterrent to women's capacity to free and autonomous individual. Biological capability of women is construed as nature's sanction of sexual division of labour. She advocated for contraception, right to abortion state support for child rearing and dissolution of nuclear families. Shulamith's work is acknowledged as important radical work that includes the dimension of class and race. All institutions including family were identified as potential sites of oppression. Many radical feminists denounced heterosexuality that legitimised the sexual domination of men over women.

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) pressed the idea that the burdens of domesticity and nuclear family deprive them from their capacity to action. Women are made to cater to the needs and desires of men's world by separating themselves from their sexuality, natural and political autonomy. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon have come very strongly against pornography, describing it as sex discrimination against women.<sup>9</sup> Feminist like Alison Jaggar thinks that radical feminism is elitist movement represents the special experience of a relatively small group of predominantly white, middle class, college-educated American women.

### **Psychoanalytic feminism :**

In the field of Psychoanalytic feminism scholars like Alfred Adler, Karen Horney and Clara Thompson tried to question the Freudian explanation of essentialism and stressed that men and women's experience of sexuality has been socially constructed.<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalysts like them tried to bring in the role of our tradition, institutions, laws, morals, customs in shaping our patriarchal conceptualisation of women's sexuality and characteristics. Juliet Mitchell in her work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* Freud, Reich, Liang and Women (1974) depicted Freud's analysis of masculinity and femininity as the constructs of patriarchal culture. She said that men exchange women for marriage rather than vice-versa accounts for the patriarchal character of human society. Psychoanalysis, in her views can be utilized by feminists for containment of patriarchy.

Similarly, Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) finds exclusive female mothering responsible for

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<sup>9</sup> A strong debate exists in the west regarding the issue of pornography. Feminist like Dworkin and Mackinnon plead that pornography is dehumanizing and degrading for women. It amounts to forced sex and is responsible for all forms of male violence against women like rape, domestic violence, sexual subjugation etc. Pornography, they believe perpetuates sexual hierarchy and violence. Liberal feminist who identify themselves as pro-sex like Nadine Strossen, Alison Assister denounce any censorship of pornography citing the right to freedom of speech and expression as the case.

<sup>10</sup> Tong, Rosemarie (1989), *Feminist Thought A Comprehensive Introduction*, Routledge; London, pp.147.

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gendered role and inferiority of women. Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow find source of all problems in the fact that women do all the mothering. If the father and mother contribute equally to mothering then perhaps boys and girls would grow up realising that men and women both are loving and autonomous. The system of dual parenting will have more presence of father in home, can liberate a woman who has a productive work outside and the male child will not develop the fears the maternal power. Hence he will not grow up rejecting the feminine feeling of nurturance considered unworthy of real men.<sup>11</sup>

In her work *In a Different Voice* (1982) Carol Gilligan argued about gender difference in moral development and moral decision making. She famously engaged in a debate with Lawrence Kohlberg known as **the Ethics of Care Debate**. Gilligan challenged the Freudian notion that men have a well developed sense of justice and morality whereas women do not. She emphasised that the socialisation process in the family and society inculcates different methods of moral thinking between women and men. Whereas women generally display orientation for care, men follow the orientation for justice. This in no sense proves that men's conceptualisation and understanding is better. It only means that men and women relate to the world and their fellow beings differently.

Lawrence Kohlberg while celebrating the qualities that define the masculine world underrates the care ethics of women. He projects the universalistic idea of justice, rights based on rationality as superior to care which is based on emotions. Gilligan contends that ethics of care is based on relatedness and responsiveness to others. Women's world is based upon care, concerns and connectness and may be superior to justice.

Feminists have reacted in mixed ways to the ethics of care debate. Whereas some rejoice the distinctiveness of women and her core values, others denounce its essentialising assumptions. Martha Nussbaum thinks that rights and justice discourse have emancipatory potential for women therefore, should not be undermined. The ethics of care proposition may strengthen the stereotyping of sexual and domestic responsibilities of women reinforcing patriarchy.

### **Black Feminism :**

Contemporary times have given rise to new variants of feminism that see certain specific issue central to their analysis. Black Feminism emphasises the issue of racism as central to oppression of women of colour. It has challenged the tendency within feminism to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.156.

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ignore the racial differences and to suggest that women endure a common oppression by virtue of their sex.<sup>12</sup>

Calling the feminism of white women as exclusionary, they say that black women face different forms of oppression that is racist and sexist. Critical insights in this regards has come from Alice Walker (*The Colour Purple*, 1982), Bell Hooks (*Ain't I a Woman? Black women and Feminism* (1981), Barbara Smith (*Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom: The Truth that Never Hurts* 1998), Angela Davis (*Women, Race and Class*, 1983), Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought* 1990) etc. All these writings show the intersectionality of racism, sexism and class oppression. Combahee River collective was a Black feminist lesbian organisation 1974-1980 that tried to establish separate identity related to identity and sexuality.

### Postmodern Feminism :

Unlike other perspectives on feminism, Postmodern feminism<sup>13</sup> has an uneasy relationship with feminism.<sup>14</sup> They find feminism as explanatory category that tries to explain the world according to some order that they call phallogocentrism.<sup>15</sup> Post modernist scholars want to escape this approach of explaining the world in terms of some natural symbolic order, built up on grand stories of history or metanarratives that has a drive to reach a single goal of stability. Entire western philosophy and the knowledge emanating from it from Plato to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan is a drive to search for sameness. Therefore woman is seen as a reflection of a man, the same as man, except in her sexuality. All these writers have tried to suppress the difference in order to confirm to the natural order constructed by man. This is the reason that novelist Helene Cixous says that men's writings are phallogocentric, always trying to affirm to the symbolic order in which man is the master, the maker. Women exist in man's world on his term; man is the self, and woman is the other.<sup>16</sup> Cixous stresses that women must come out of the world that men have constructed for them. Feminist writings are identified as the potential source of liberation through transformation of social and cultural standards by Cixous.

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<sup>12</sup> Heywood, Andrew (1992). *Political Ideologies*, Palgrave; Macmillan, pp. 262.

<sup>13</sup> Post modern feminism is also known as French Feminism as most of the scholars engaged in this field either belonged to France or were situated there.

<sup>14</sup> Tong, Rosemarie (1989), *Feminist Thought A Comprehensive Introduction*, Routledge; London, pp.217.

<sup>15</sup> Phallogocentrism is important thought in postmodern theory. It means that the world operates in symbolic order denoting stability and certainty constructed by men that is made to appear as natural. Postmodern theorists defy such attempts of objective account of reality, instead they stress disorder, differences, discrete nature of our existence. They see the dominant language as masculine and urge women to construct their own language and writings.

<sup>16</sup> Tong, Rosemarie (1989), *Feminist Thought A Comprehensive Introduction*, Routledge; London, pp.224.



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Feminist epistemology and stand point theory claim that the dominant discourses of knowledge have always excluded the women and marginalised so that their voices have been rendered irrelevant. The true account of history and reality will begin from the inclusion of their experiences, perceptions and understandings.

Similar concerns have been displayed by Luce Irigaray. She contends that masculine discourse has never been able to understand women or the feminine or anything that is other than masculine. As the female sexuality is not like male's, therefore is described as the absence or the lack. In order to create a new meaning of feminine from women's perception, Irigaray suggests that the Oedipus complex has to be exploded. Patriarchy is seen as manifestation of masculine libidinal economy completely dismissive of female sexuality. Like Cixous, Irigaray saw women's sexuality as very positive and liberating. It celebrated the element of multiplicity in female's sexuality and her experiences.

Julia Kristeva's stand differs from Cixous and Irigaray as she objects to the conceptualisation of idea of 'women' or 'feminine' as essentialist philosophy and hence must be deconstructed. She also discusses all other groups that have been considered as misfits and whose voices have not been part of the dominant discourse like the homosexuals, Jews, racial and ethnic minorities. The common thread between Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray is that they stress the need to explore the complex relationship between language, sexuality and power to develop non-phallogentric ways of thinking

**Post Modern Feminism** objects to the essentialist philosophy of feminism. Its focus is more on the diversity that marks the life and living of women across the societies and cultures. It denies any pre defined parameters for women's movement and celebrates the heterogeneity and subjectivity of women's world.

work *Gender Troubles* (1990) questions the coherence of categories of sex, gender and sexuality. She described gender as performative. Harraway holds that all women cannot be bound in a unified category. She highlights a strong bias in scientific culture and proposes cyborg feminism that will enable all women to escape the drudgery of naturalism and essentialism. Cixous in *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975) covers the intricate relation between sexuality and language. Irigaray in *The Sex which is not One* (1985) elaborates the objectification and commodification of women and shows how entire society is based on the exchange of women among men.

However one of the critiques of postmodern feminists is that they have withdrawn from the real revolutionary struggles and take on only to elite intellectual engagements.



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Whereas feminists all over the world are showing resistance in concrete terms in form of protests, boycotts, marches, campaigns, post modern feminists are still hooked to the fancies of their intellectual abstraction. Others do not find them easily comprehensible; resultantly they make no sense to many.

### Eco-Feminists :

Later on, other school of thoughts such as **Cultural feminism** emerged that celebrates the difference between man and woman. Eco-feminists like Vandana Shiva hold that the qualities and capabilities harboured by women like creation, nurturance, sustenance and rootedness make them different and may be better than men. In that sense eco-feminists celebrate the feminine difference derided by patriarchy. **Post-feminism** defies the ideas of second wave feminism or radical feminism. Feminists such as Camille Paglia and Natasha Walter stress that women should celebrate their sexuality, projecting themselves not as victims but as agents.

### Central Themes in Feminism:

#### Sex-Gender Differentiation :

Sex is a fact that one is born a male or a female. It refers to the biological difference between the two sexes and implies that men and women will be different in some respect (for example in anatomy, task of reproduction). However, gender distinction is a social construction. This implies that the social and cultural norms that women are assigned with are result of this biological determinism and essentialism that identify women and men with certain 'essential' nature. The biological function of reproduction of women has come to characterise her rest of role and responsibilities in family and society. The reproductive and care ethics of bearing and rearing of children has been projected as essence of women's life. Such constructions of gender stereotypes create hierarchy with men at the top and women at the bottom.<sup>17</sup> Feminist scholars have challenged these perceived 'natural' differences between men and women.

Historical literatures have always projected the primacy of male and pushed women to the backyards of anonymity. This misogynist approach is pervasive in all the canonical texts. The form and matter relation outlined by Plato and Aristotle compared the knowable form, - the mind, the rational to the male and non-rational, disorderly and unknowable to female. Therefore, they believe, the rightful dominance of mind over the body, man over nature, male over female. This mindset has cultivated our knowledge, formed our value system and became an inherent part of our culture, traditions, and

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<sup>17</sup> McKinnon, Catriona, (2008), *Issues in Political Theory*, Oxford University Press.

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institutions.<sup>18</sup> Through the ages, such deliberate constructions have been invented to assign the subjugated and secondary position to women.

### Nature/Culture :

The idea of binary oppositions such as reason/emotion, mind/body, universal/particular, and objectivity/subjectivity nature/culture are informed by patriarchal constructs. In that sense, modern science also has been consciously gendered, andocentric activity as pointed by feminists such as Donna Haraway, Nelly Oudshoorn, Evelyn Fox Keller, Dorothy Smith and many others. All these ideological moorings and inappropriate account of identity of male and female guided the philosophical imagination in later developments of the traditions. Gender differences as typically imposed through contrasting stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of maleness has been identified with a clear determinate mode of thought, femaleness with the vague and indeterminate. Femaleness has been linked with passivity. In her outstanding work *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir has illustrated our biased understanding of sexual reproduction. She observed, where as male gamete 'sperm' has been seen as active and agile, the female gamete 'egg' is superficially passive; its compact mass sealed up within itself, evokes natural darkness and inward repose.<sup>20</sup> Devoid of motility, the egg waits while the sperm, free, slender and agile penetrates it. This natural biological phenomenon has been generalized and seen as an exact reflection of the microcosm. Resultantly we have biological determinism and essentialism that defines these realms of activities as 'authentic' engagements of women. The identity of male is thus derived from the agility, vividness, restlessness of the spermatozoon, while female has been typified as passive and inert recipient.

It is interesting to note that new research has suggested that the sperm's motion is not strong enough to propel it forward, and that, in fact the egg's surface exudes as energy that actively draws the sperm towards itself.<sup>21</sup> This identity has been carried on down the ages and even the modern biology confirms with medieval symbolism. Sexual relation is basically seen as the relation between the gametes.<sup>22</sup> However, most feminists have vehemently repudiated the concept that biology is destiny. Margaret mead in her work *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* questioned the

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that Francis Bacon, the father of modern science perceived women as nature and said it to be a task of science, denoting masculinist mode of aggression to conquer and enslave her.

<sup>19</sup> Heywood, Andrew (1992). *Political Ideologies*, Palgrave; Macmillan.

<sup>20</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 97.

<sup>21</sup> Menon, Nivedita (2012) *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Penguin Books, Zuban, New Delhi, pp86.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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naturalistic assumption about sex differences saying that gender is always a constructed category, not a natural one.<sup>23</sup>

The Sex- Gender Debate State the fact that sex is biological given category where as gender is the identity that is produced by the society and its institutions by constantly mediating and moulding women's lives. The Patriarchal social order rears the female mind, body and her entire life in manners that are conducive to its norm of centrality of male and subordination of female in all possible forms.

The sex/gender distinction has been rejected by those who maintain that there is no stable biological basis for classifying people by sex.<sup>24</sup> Examples are many of those that we call women lack capacity to give birth, many are sexually attracted to other women, some feel like they are men trapped in female bodies, and some have indeterminate sexual organs or male chromosomes.<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler contends the notion that sex is pre-given where as gender is cultural inscription of the society. In fact gender as a way of thinking and as a concept, pre-exists the body; it is gender that produces the category of biological sex as a series of performance.<sup>26</sup> Post modern feminists clearly reject understanding of the world in terms of binary opposites. This connotes that sex cannot be merely seen as dichotomous category or of binary opposites, but needs a larger canvas for understanding.

### The Public/Private Divide :

The public/private dichotomy is central to feminist movement expressed in the slogan 'The personal is Political'. It is scathing critique of the traditionally forged wall of separation between the political or the public sphere consisting of state, government and the personal and private sphere comprised by the family and personal relationships. Feminists accuse classical liberal philosophers and scholars of deliberately out-casting the private or domestic sphere from their indulgence. Whereas the state has been sanctioned the authority and legitimacy to interfere and legislate on the subjects that fall under the public sphere, the private has been left untouched, therefore warding off any responsibility towards the private sphere.

**Public-Private divide** is one of the fundamental issues in feminism. It stands for the deliberate attempt of the patriarchal societies to exclude women from the public sphere, the site of power and authority by restricting them to the walls of domesticity. Feminists identify this divide as the root cause of most of the gender troubles and gender inequality.

<sup>23</sup> Menon, Nivedita (2012) *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Penguin Books, Zubaan, New Delhi, pp70.

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Feminists argue that most of the injustices, crimes and violence occur against women within the confines of four walls. Relegating the domestic world outside of the state purview can be seen as the act of collusion in patriarchy by the state. The conventional understanding of family life as non-political is misleading. Feminists have widened the definition of politics itself by asserting that if politics is about power and domination, then potentially all relations including that between spouses are political. Politics is not just confined to the public bodies and governments, but governs all aspect of our existence, including our personal lives. This was the time, when family was out lined as the primary site of oppression of women. Many feminists stressed the exigency to democratise the private sphere, by bringing it in the mainstream politics.

Susan Moller Okin's work is crucial in this regard. According to her, this mythical divide has led to exclusion of family from the conceptual field of political science ignoring problems of justice in everyday life. This omission has fostered gender injustices and inequalities. Okin says that private sphere is the sphere of power. The explicitly political spheres defines and infiltrates the personal for example state defines who may marry, what the requirements of marriage are, conditions of ending of marriage etc.<sup>27</sup> Family practice and perpetuate sexism by socialising children into gender norms. It thus becomes arena for constructing and providing meanings and interpretations to the patriarchal constructs. Sexual division of labour becomes entrenched and goes unquestioned, even though it operates at the cost of her autonomy and agency.

Cynthia Enloe in *Banana, Beaches and Bases* (2000) takes this argument further ahead and powerfully declares 'personal is international'. It connotes that the ideas constructing the image of respectable woman and honourable man is constructed very much by domestic politics which in turn is mediated by gendered roles within the family.

### **Patriarchy and Violence :**

Patriarchy has pervaded mostly all human societies. It is hierarchal unequal system that oppresses and exploits women making them subordinate. It propagates gendered division of labour and sexism. Whereas men are privileged and immune, women work hard to cater to family without being recognised or thanked. Patriarchy is game of

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<sup>27</sup> McKinnon, Catriona, *Issues in Political Theory*, Oxford University Press. pp225.

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power in which men enjoy the advantages at the cost of the freedom, health and happiness of women. Gerda Lerner in her analysis of patriarchy observes that the subordination of women started with the appropriation of women's sexual and reproductive capacities. There is nothing natural about it and therefore it must be challenged.

Patriarchy shapes our understanding and interpretations. As outcome we witness rampant sexist and andocentric bias in our understanding of social life. It is a world where male is measure of all things and female amounts to nothing. However, this social order that is heavily inclined in favour of man is deliberately made to appear as natural so that women must affirm to it and assimilate themselves in this permanent state of subordination. This can be best explained with the description of patriarchy as nude make up, where this social order is maintained by faithful performance of prescribed rituals over and over again throughout one's lifetime.<sup>28</sup> Just like in case of nude make up, one spends hours painting the face to appear as if it has not been touched, similarly patriarchy is made to appear natural but there has been centuries invested in construction of masculine universe that always keeps women at the periphery.

In such societies family, religion, media, laws act as the structures of patriarchy that legitimise and perpetuate its androcentric ethos. As result, the dominant social order gets reflected in cinema, literature, painting, fashion, philosophy and religion thus reinforcing and reproducing gender stereotypes and sexist culture. Patriarchal societies engage in violence of several kinds and degrees towards women. There are gender specific crimes like sexual harassment, molestation, rape, marital rape, domestic violence, trafficking, forced prostitution etc. Crimes such as rape are more about power and domination of man over woman than it is about sex. It is deliberate attempt to severely restrict women's access to public spaces.

The violence against women and the gender specific crimes reiterates the inequality and subordination of women in all spheres of life. All patriarchal societies indulge in violence against women in various forms and degrees.

It is important to mention here that many impositions on women on the name of culture and customs across the world are nothing but manifestations of patriarchy in tacit or explicit form. Therefore, the dictums of khap panchayats in some of the villages of Haryana in India in reality have nothing to do with decorum of justice. On the contrary, the objective is to maintain the existing patriarchal heterosexual order of the society that

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<sup>28</sup> Menon, Nivedita, (2012). *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Penguin books, Zubaan, New Delhi, Introduction.



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suits the men's thirst for power and domination. Similarly there is no element of honour in the honour crimes widely prevalent in parts of South-Asia in which young women are tortured and killed for following their decisions in their life regarding whom they want to marry. Similar is the case with female genital mutilation, or practice of veil or purdah in some part of the world justified on the name of cultural rights.

### Contemporary Engagements :

Feminist movements all over the world have been grappling with the challenges to empower women. With the changing time new problems emerge and creative insights are required to address them. Feminists have to be extremely careful about how new policies and dynamics further complicate already fragile lives of women. Vandana Shiva points out that as women community we have to be very careful to the nefarious impact of globalisation on us in terms of visible feminisation and casualisation of labour. Women have been world's original food producer, and continue to be central to the food production system in the global south.<sup>29</sup> However, under the guise of neo-liberal economy, the giant agro business and biotech corporations are wreaking havoc on indigenous sustainable agriculture, primarily done by women. Development models of the state have been very exclusionary of women and the other marginal groups in the society.

Any discourse including that of feminism has to respond to the contingent realities of that specific context. This has been stressed by black feminism as well as postcolonial feminism. For example, any account of women's oppression in India, has to consider the multiple deprivations and complex nexus between caste, class, ethnicity and gender. A dalit woman in India faces multiple layers of deprivations that make her extremely vulnerable. Similarly a woman of colour will be at the risk of multifold oppression compared to a white woman in a racist society. As result any attempt towards essentialist construction of women must be resisted for the acknowledgement of plurality diversity and differences that exist in lives and living of women.

New issues like surrogacy have emerged in the poorer regions of the world that may end in exploiting women by pushing them to hardship and health risks. Commercial Surrogacy refers to the contractual arrangement in which a woman carries the embryo of infertile couple in her womb for sake of money. There is whole range of problems raised by feminists like the reproductive commodification of women's body, and other ethical issues involved with it.

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<sup>29</sup> Shiva, Vandana (2010) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, (Introduction) Women Unlimited, New Delhi (first published by Kali for Women in 1988 Unlimited).



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One way towards empowering women will be to look at property rights of women. The writings of feminist scholars like Bina Agarwal, Jayati Ghosh, Vandana Shiva and others plead for property rights including right to land as well as common resources like water and biodiversity to women. The government policies has to be gender sensitive in the sense that it has to work creatively to bring all women to the main stream to provide them access to resources and opportunities. In terms of policies there have been Women in Development (WID), Woman and Development (WAD) and later on Gender Analysis in Development (GAD) approaches to evaluate and bring women in the discourse of development. Alongside, from 1980s there has been attempt on gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, gender auditing to reinstate women in economy, politics and society. The focus is to see women not as passive beneficiaries but as active agents and catalysts of change. As result we have gender linked micro credit schemes, enrolment of tribal women of joint forest management programmes. However the emancipatory potential of these state led institutional initiatives have to be scrutinised. Nivedita Menon rightly points out that government programmes do lend space for women to participate in public realm, nevertheless feminist politics needs to be suspicious of domestication of gender through state policies.<sup>30</sup>

### Gendering Political Theory :

The main stream political theorising has been highly gender biased. A close scrutiny of the discipline reveals that politics has been projected as a masculine engagement and all questions pertaining women have been dismissed as not so relevant. The study and practice of politics have operated to the exclusion of women from the field. This disappointment is apparent in the observation by Susan Molar Okin that contemporary political theory is in one significant respect in the Dark Ages...most political theorists have yet to take gender seriously.<sup>31</sup> In fact gender and political theory is believed to have uneasy relationship. Similarly Carole Pateman's argument outlines that the continued omission of question of gender from the politics syllabus has been a result not simply of contingent and individual acts of sexism, but rather of a fundamental partiality of the very terms of debate upon which the discipline has been based.

Important works like that of Judith Squires expose the claimed objectivity and universality of the discipline.<sup>32</sup> In her book Squires states that the feminist response

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<sup>30</sup> Menon Nivedita, (2012) *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Penguin Books, Zubaan, New Delhi, pp218.

<sup>31</sup> Okin, Susan Moller, (1991) *Humanist Liberalism*. In Nancy Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp.39.

<sup>32</sup> The book *Gender in Political Theory* (Polity Press, 2000) by Judith Squires is one of the most remarkable in this field. Squires has revealed that how all the canonical texts, the grand theories and concepts in the study of politics have been very masculine, completely ignoring women and her faculty.

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towards this gendered nature of political theory can be categorised in three basic approaches representing the attempt at inclusion, reversal and displacement. These three views also reflect equality, difference and plurality respectively. In the first position inclusion is stressed and the effort is to transcend gender to allow political theory to be neutral and impartial. It aims to include and engage women in the domain of politics from which they have been excluded so far. Equality and liberty are the important ideas guiding them. This position is reflected in liberal feminists.

The second position is that of reversal where the difference between two gender is highlighted. The objective here is to reconceptualise politics in such a way that it becomes sensitive towards gender specificity. The masculine presumptions in politics, this view believes, have to be dismantled to yield space to feminist political theory. This perspective is endorsed by radical, maternal or cultural feminists.

The third position is represented by those who espouse the strategy of displacement, deconstruction and destabilization. Their approach is firmly grounded in diversity politics. This outlook holds the concept of gender to be partly constituted by the discourse of political theory itself. It aims neither to de-gender (making political theory gender neutral) or re-gender (making political theory recognise specific gendered identity) as advocated by first and second position respectively. Instead it aspires to reveal the ways in which political theory itself creates this gender binary and politics of exclusion that follow it.

Most feminist scholarships aim at integrating all three approaches in their work. Their objective is reconceptualising and recasting political theory and its core concepts such as equality, justice, citizenship and representation from a plural feminist stand point. Therefore the cardinal project in front of the feminists is to resurrect this gender ignorant and gender devoid political theory into gender sensitive, gender specific and gender responsive.

**Gendering political theory** is about sensitising our understanding of exclusionary politics of the study and practice of politics itself. The legacy of politics being masculinist, has always omitted women's question. Therefore there is utmost necessity to make it gender neutral, gender sensitive and plural by encompassing the realities of the women's world. It calls for political engagements that are inclusive of all

The modern definitions of politics as offered by political theorists like Lertwong, Held and many others emphasise that politics concerns all groups, institutions (formal and informal), public and private lives, all acts of cooperation, negotiation etc. Such

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understandings have widened the space and scope of politics thus bringing in gender into the mainstream political studies. The instrumentalist conception of politics as power virtually opened the so forth restricted gates of politics for the feminist engagements. Since power is omnipresent in all institutions and the formal and informal functioning of it, by that very understanding politics becomes inclusive of gender issues and concerns.

The myth of women and her world inherently belonging to the private realm has to be demystified as women's subordinate position in the family also gets translated in her subordination in the public sphere. In this context comments Joni Lovenduski, that the dominant conceptions of political studies is bound to exclude women largely as they usually do not dispose of public power, belong to political elites or hold influential positions in government position.<sup>33</sup> Therefore it is so crucial that every project of justice must begin with addressing the personal relations within the family as all relations are power relations and thus are political.

At a broader spectrum, as feminists our effort should be to engender political theory. Every concept has to be analysed from feminist point of view. For example, any theory of justice must include gender view of justice. Similarly, the analysis of power must focus on patriarchy as patriarchy is about power, dominance and oppression. Discussion on equality must address the issue of women's equality. The point of marginality and suppression of women must be brought to the fore front of the political studies.

### Conclusion :

Many contend that we have arrived a post feminist era and feminism has declined in its role and relevance. However feminists like Sylvia Walsby in her book, the *Future of Feminism* emphatically asserts that feminism is pulsating and taking new forms. It will remain viable as long as gender inequality and patriarchy persist. In fact, new feminist insights are addressing local issues, forming global coalitions and aiming at complete emancipation. Women's movement today is the most dynamic and progressive of all social movements in many countries.

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<sup>33</sup> Lovenduski, Joni (1981) Towards the Emasculation of Political Science. In Dale Spencer (ed.), *Men's Studies Modified*, Oxford, Pergamon.

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### Exercise

**Question 1 :** Discuss in brief the history of origin and development of feminism.

**Question 2 :** Illustrate the major approaches in the study of feminism.

**Question 3 :** What is patriarchy? Critically analyse how women are marginalized and subordinated in such a system.

**Question 4 :** What do you understand by gendering political theory?



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