

Feminism : A Philosophical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

My research paper focuses its attention on the concept of feminism and traces its very development giving important landmarks achieved in each stage of its development. It aims to view feminism through a philosophical perspective highlighting its philosophical dimensions; from feminism being a philosophy of life to philosophy of reform.

Key Words: *Feminism, Women, protofeminists*

"Imaginatively she is of the highest importance, practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history... Some of the most inspired works, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of husband."¹

Virginia Woolf

Introduction:

Feminism, a widely discussed and debated term is generally considered to be phenomena of the 19th and 20th centuries though the term was coined in France in the year 1880. Bearing a wide range of implications, meanings and dimensions it has been defined and understood in several ways central to each of them is the very concept of women. Feminism may be viewed as a philosophy of life to a philosophy of reform which envisages a world devoid of gender inequalities.

Feminism may be described variously from being a political expression to one having philosophical implications. "Feminism constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds... There is and must be a diversity of feminism responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women and defined by them for themselves."²

Feminism may also be interpreted as a philosophy that fights against such definitions of masculine and feminine, and aims at placing women in a just perspective.³ Feminist philosophy refers to philosophy approached from a feminist perspective. Feminist philosophy involves both attempts to use the methods of philosophy to further the cause of the feminist movements, and attempts to criticize or re-evaluate the ideas of traditional philosophy from within a feminist framework.⁴

Tracing the very history of feminism we find that as early as 1630 many of the radical English sects began to support religious equality for women.⁵ Instead of

elaborating their ideas in writings they used them to modify social forms in which women might be free of male power and authority. The most important writer of this time is Mary Wollstonecraft, often characterized as the first feminist philosopher.

Thus an idea about the rights of women, her position in society began to be expressed powerfully in different works during this period but a well organized movement for women's rights did not begin until 1848.⁶

It was in this very year that the demand for suffrage rouse which proved to be a milestone in the social and political revolution for women's rights. A campaign lasting for about a century resulted in the winning of the right to vote in England in 1918 and in America in 1920.⁷ The period from 1920 to 1960 may be termed as a period of intermission in the history of women's rights movements when voices for women's rights became complacent and it was not until late 1960's that a new feminist movement started.

The feminism before 1960s is considered by few as the forerunner of the present feminist movement and they term the feminist writers of that time as 'protofeminists'. Some of the notable works by these so called protofeminists include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Margaret Fullers's *Women in the 19th century America* (1920), and Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Male writers to this tradition of feminist writing include John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Friedrich Engel's *The Origin of the Family* (1884).⁸

These books tried to diagnose the problem of women's inequality in society and in some cases proposed solutions.

The feminism post 1970's went into exposing the mechanism of patriarchy that is the cultural mind set in men and women which perpetuate sexual inequality. Here attention was purely focused on books by male writers to search for how women are represented in literature. They find that women are represented in

relation to men, they do not exist for their sake. Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* states that women are represented as merely the negative object or "other" to man as the dominating subject, who is assumed to represent humanity in general.⁹

Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968) deals about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men.¹⁰

Then in the 1980's in feminism began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism and then switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook and reconstructing the lost and suppressed records of female experience.

Later the attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women's writings by rewritings the history in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence. Thus, in 1980s, feminism emerges as a thought system, a point of view to reorganize the world realities, a positivist holistic approach to life..., and perhaps the only mode

for preservation of human existence on the planet.¹¹

A study of this very development of feminism makes us to conclude that feminism as a philosophy tries to change such cultural processes or ideologies which consider masculine as active, rational, and feminine as timid and passive.

Feminism, as a philosophy of life, seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep seated causes of women's oppression. These are to be found, for example, in the legal system, such as unequal labour, marriage, and divorce laws.¹²

It uncovers and exposes the very way in which the concept of feminine has been built up through various instrument of socialization be it our culture, language or even literature.

Feminism may also be viewed as a philosophy of reform which visualizes considerable transformation in traditional social structures such as in the economic role, position and power of women, and finally in the basic ways of thinking and personnel relationships, which would lead to a just social order.

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