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Feminism: A literary movement

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Abstract

Feminism is often debated whether it is a movement of a theory or both. Most of the western and American literatures accept it as a moment rather than a theory. The present paper analyses how feminism evolved as a movement and penetrated into literature as a literary form. The world witnessed radical changes in 1960s in empowering women shrinking the gender gap and enabling them to stand in equal footing with men in every field of life. How literature caught hold of the movement in literature has been analyzed with evidences.

Keywords: Feminism, second sex, atrocity, westernization, modernization, gender, constitution

Introduction

The concept of feminism owes its origin in the early seventeenth century in the Western world due to the social, economic, cultural and legal disparities between men and women. Women subjugated the men's supremacy for their economic dependence. In case a man deserted his wife for any reasons, her condition turned worst. To survive, the poor and lower middle class women have to attend brothels where the tortures crossed all the limits.

In work places the women were also tortured and often misbehaved and molested by their co-employees. The administration did not have any provisions to take action against the offenders as the laws were in the favor of men.

Illiteracy and poverty were the main hurdles to go against the men. The legal provisions are also in the favor of men. In this socio-cultural set up, women had to bear upon all the atrocities for their safety.

Marry Wollstonecraft, the first woman writer and the female activist of the western world, first raised her voice against the male atrocities against the women and advocated for the equality of woman with men. Her boyfriend Godwin was a famous philosopher and writer of the liberal moment of Europe who advocated liberalism in administration and society which influenced the Europe a lot. He had a lot of followers like P.B Shelley.

Marry Wollstonecraft travelled to Europe and America with Godwin and found the same condition of women in all the societies. So she set up a girls' school but that school could not function due to lack of students. This failure brought her a concrete picture of women who were denied education.

Her masterpiece "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) was the first document raising voice for against society that treated women as slaves. In this essay she advocates for education of women which could enlighten them to emancipate themselves from the villainy of society which did not allow them to stand with men in equal footing. Wollstonecraft portrays her society how was socially backward was criticized for her reform mind set. Her rebellious mindset brought about a change in the society. She faced all the criticism with courage. She writes in her seminal essay how the women were taught in the family to be the only servant of the men and their main duties were to serve. The social conditions of the women in the society gave them the status of slaves. Wollstonecraft writes, "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mother, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly turned cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and he scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of property, will obtained from them the protection of man; and they should be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, a les, twenty years of their lives." (508)

This is enough to learn the socio-economic and cultural status of the women in Europe. This passage implies the women were the "Second Sex" which the French existentialist

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philosopher Simon de Beauvoir said one and half a century after to stir a revolution in the world.

Mary Wollstonecraft also portrays the condition women since the Renaissance through literature. The socio-cultural conditions of women are better portrayed in literature. So the literature is the social history of a particular society because it acts as the mirror to reflect the contemporary activities. The writers like John Milton and the famous philosophers and spiritual leaders also portrayed women in the same way the society treated. They did not bring out any reformation in their writings rather they supported it despite their awareness what was the reality.

Wollstonecraft writes, "Milton describes our first rail mother; in the true Mohometan strain, he meant to deprive us of the souls, and insinuates that we were being soul designated by the sweet attractive grace, ad docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wings of contemplation." (509)

It indicates that the intellectuals of the time either could not studied women properly or they cleverly skipped to tread the controversial areas for personal reasons. She not only portrays the condition of women but also the mindset of the great personalities, intellectual and writers

Mary Wollstonecraft analyses, quoting from different texts from different ages of English literature, the condition and status of women in the society. The great writers like Milton were the product of their ages but they were not that much progressive to understand the atrocities against women rather they stuck to their ages despite realizing the social problems against women.

Virginia Woolf's *A House of One Own* (1929), a path breaking work on feminism, deals with the condition of the women of the Europe starting from the sixteen to the twentieth century. How the women denied all the political and social rights enjoyed by their men counterpart. All the talent, efficiencies and virtues were not recognized by the society. They were doomed to serve the men.

Her essay is divided into three sections. The first section portrays the condition of the sixteenth century England through the imaginary sister of Shakespeare who was denied to compose, dance and to act on the stage through she was as talented as William Shakespeare. Having the same educational qualification and talent as her playwright brother, she had to serve the men. Woolf portrays the socio-cultural condition of women of traditional Europe like Wollstonecraft citing different writers. The talented women, even like Shakespeare, did not have any importance in society rather they were doomed to serve like slaves. The patriarchal society didn't pay any attention for the upliftment of the women. They were denied education and taught to serve their male partners bearing all the atrocities.

Virginia Woolf, a leading woman writer of the modernism and a psychoanalytical novelist, imagines how the gifted women would have been confronting the society in case they had tried to use their talent in literature during the time of Shakespeare. She, like Wollstonecraft, writes from her experience what she had been confronting a patriarchal society. The discourse of feminism from the society to literature is men dominated. She admits that she has not read any literary texts in her life time in which a woman is a friend of man rather women are portrayed as the beloved of men. The writers focus on the physical beauty and virtues of the heroine. Often the woman is portrayed as evil, witch and vampire in literature. The literature before her rarely refers

to reality. Without understanding women and their state of minds often the male writers write volumes on them which are far from reality only based on the imagination. In this way the men could not know anything about the mindset of the women and what they reality want. Their desires and natural instincts rarely reflected in literature. The gifted women did not dare to put their gift in use only for public mockery. So some women writers wrote in the pen names of men. As women did not write men could not understand women and their problems. Virginia Woolf explains what would have happened if a woman tries her talent in literature.

In her seminal essay "A House of One's Own", she writes, "... any women born with a gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her day in a lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty". (543)

The talent and god gifted quality must be put into use for the betterment of society as they are the half of the population. Woolf does a yeoman's service in literature portraying the mind of women without describing her body, gesture and activities. Her novels depict women as they are in a layer of fiction reality reflected to understand women and their instincts. How a woman suffers silently in the disguise of smiling and hides happiness behind the camouflage of tears are the subject matters of her writings. She paves the path for the intellectual to the intrigue path of women's hearts which could not be discovered before.

Woolf depicted the inner sufferings of women in the hand of men of Europe. The society, out of ignorance and ego, put the half of the population in dark and distress. Mary Wollstonecraft only portrays the socio-economic condition of women in Europe. When the two seminal essays the two great feminists are compared and contrasted, it found that both the social and psychological atrocities meted to the entire women folk have been surfaced in literature. These essays are the path breaking works to understand the problems of women which provided stuff to the writers to depict women in realistic way.

So Simon de Beauvoir says that a woman is not born as a woman but she is made a woman. Women are born like men but the society makes them women. It implies that the society is the real villain to cage them. The so called progressive people did not raise their voices against such atrocities despite knowing the reality. So the European and American society ran without reforms.

In 1960s the feminism as movement gathered momentum in America after the publication of *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simon de Beauvoir. It began to spread to Europe and then to Asia. The entire world witnessed the women united and fought for their emancipation. Radical changes noticed all over the world bringing women to the limelight. Laws and constitutions of the progressive countries began to change as a result to render women special protection through the constitutional means.

As literature is the mirror of the society, it reflects feminism and its struggle in literature. The world literature runs in a unique direction of feminism diversifying in different perspectives and angles. Different critics and theorist

divided feminism into different branches but all the branches of feminism only focus on the emancipation of women from the atrocities of men by portraying how the women suffer in society due to the evil custom and tradition. How women live as the beasts in society carrying the burden of men even completely dedicating themselves for their husbands, fathers and son have been narrated in different texts. Some fiction in America and Europe sprang to fame overnight being adapted into movies to get international film awards.

India did not lag behind. The Indians writing in English and in the regional languages came out with masterpiece texts portraying female struggle in literature. R. K Nayana is the frontrunner of such movement whose *The Guide* composed in 1959 reflected the feministic movement. *The Guide* also bagged The Central Sahitya Academy Award in 1961, the peak time of feministic movement in the world. The popularity of feminism in India tempted the film producers to film carving out script from the text, *The Guide*. The film also hit the box office by the women viewers.

Different western critics and theorists different criticize the texts based on the feminism. Some opine that only the female writers can write better about the female problems. The male writers cannot feel the pangs of the child birth except imagining it. It is natural that the male writers can rarely roam in the hearts of the women and to realize their problems which they feign or cover up.

N. Geeta says, "Feminist writers and critics have keenly felt the complete negation of the female experience in literature. Even the projection of the image of women has been compressed into new acceptable roles. Women are usually caste into a few popular stereotypes of narrow range of characterization. There are two basic types of image: positive roles, which depict women as independent, intelligent and even heroic; and a surplus of misogynistic roles commonly identified as the bitch, the witch, the vamp and the virgin/goddess". (61)

Feminism in literature is still a very burning topic portraying different issues of women and their problems. A large numbers of women writes sprang to fame by their writings. All these writings help to understand women better. George Eliot and Jane Austen are the English fiction writers to portray women differently from male writers. It paved path for the female writers to try their talent in writings.

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