

Gender Studies

III. Feminist Theories and Practice

1. What is Feminism

- a. The word 'feminism' itself originated from the French word *féminisme* in the nineteenth century, either as a medical term to describe the feminisation of a male body, or to describe women with masculine traits.¹ When it was used in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century it was only used to refer to one group of women: 'that asserted the uniqueness of women, the mystical experience of motherhood and women's special purity.'
- b. It soon became understood to denote a political stance of someone committed to changing the social position of women. Since then the term has taken on the sense of one who believes that women are subjugated because of their sex and that women deserve at least formal equality in the eyes of the law. Despite the fact that the usage of the term is relatively recent, it has become common practice to refer to early writers and thinkers – for example the eighteenth-century writer Mary Wollstonecraft – as 'feminist' in acknowledgement of the connections between their arguments and those of modern feminism. Women were given the right to vote in 1920 as a result of the feminist movements that began in 1850's.
- c. All feminists agree that women suffer social and/or material inequities simply because of their biological identity. They are all committed to

¹ Alexander D.F 1872

challenging this idea, but they differ in the **way** they propose to challenge it.

d. Feminist Ideas:

- i. They describe and define the relationship of nature of gender and inequality. This includes discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy
- ii. Feminist ideas champion the rights of women.
- iii. They negate the biblical representation of women as weak characters and discourage biological destiny.²
- iv. They focus on women's oppression & how to overcome it to promote equality b/w men & women; politically, economically and socially.

2. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism draws on the diversity of liberal thought dominant in Western society since the Enlightenment, and affirms that women's subordinate social position can be addressed by existing political processes under democracy.

They believe that women should be given the same opportunities in political, economic, educational and and that they have the same mental capacity as men. For liberals the key battle is access to education because if men and women are educated equally, then it follows that they will get equal access to society.³ Liberal feminists do not use the language of 'revolution' or 'liberation' favoured by radicals and socialists. They believe that democracy itself is naturally adaptable to equality for both sexes. It is based on individualism which states that all humans have same rational nature and share same values.

² This is the idea that human society and behavior are to some significant degree determined by our biological inheritance. So biological destiny of females is to reproduce.

³ Essentially, women must be like men. (John F.Kennedy)

This liberal position is broadly held to be the dominant, 'common-sense' stance on feminism. It is held by the majority of women who identify as 'feminist' in some way, but don't want to overturn the social status quo in order to achieve better social conditions for women.

In addition, liberal feminists would be more likely to accept in limited terms that women and men might well be suited to the separate spheres of home and the workplace and simply lobby for greater recognition of housework and caring (the wages for housework debate in the 1970s emerged largely from this position). However women should have the right to choose their future and not have it chosen for them.

Notable advocates:

- Mary Wollstonecraft wrote "A vindication of the rights of women" which commented on the society's views of women and encouraged women to make separate decisions other than those made for them by society. This was the first treatise on feminism. She was later credited with being a liberal feminist.
- John Stuart Mill also believed in equal rights for both sexes. In his book *The Subjection of Women*, Mill argues that three major parts of women's lives are hindering them: society and gender construction, education, and marriage

Time period:

Began in the 19th and Early 20th Century with Mary Wollstonecraft

How can change be brought?

Through acts of legislation that remove the barriers for women. These acts of legislation demand equal opportunities and rights for women, including equal access to jobs and equal pay. Liberal feminists believe that removing these barriers directly challenges the ideologies of patriarchy, as well as liberates women.

Salient features:

1. They rejected the penis envy theory⁴ and stated it to be nothing more than a social bias of the victorian era. However they stated that women need to become like men by aspiring for male values through education etc.

⁴ Penis envy theory proposed by Freud whereby young girls experience anxiety when they realise they do not possess a penis.

2. Their Primary focus is on individual autonomy, rights, liberty, and independence. Emphasise the power of the individual to change things.
3. Focused on discrimination especially in the gendered job market⁵ & on women's entry in male dominated professions.
4. They believe that change can be brought about by making important acts of legislation and raising consciousness through articles, columns, education etc.

CRITICISM

1. It does not focus on the patriarchal social structure but on individuals. So mere institutional changes are not enough, the whole system needs to be changed.
2. It focuses too much on the metamorphosis of women into men and disregards the traditional role of women and its importance.
3. It is only for women who have a middle class, heterosexual white background.

3. Radical Feminism

Early radical feminism believed that "men as part of the problem should be part of the solution." This was a theme in early radical feminism, even though radical feminism is usually associated in the popular consciousness with separatism and man-hating. Radical feminists, particularly in the USA, emerged largely from new left and civil rights political groupings. Their politics was broadly radical left, but they became hugely disenchanted with the male-dominated power play witnessed in left-wing radical groupings⁶ and formed the Women's Liberation Movement in order to allow a space for the consideration of women's oppression outside of the male-oriented knowledge and politics.

They believe that a woman-centred politics could only be devised in a woman-only space. So they focus on a policy of separatism, at least at the level of policy-making and meetings. They wanted a political formation free from the male defects (such as leader

⁵ something is 'gendered' when its character is either masculine or feminine, or when it exhibits patterns of difference by Gender. Paid work is a gendered institution, in that women and men undertake different forms of paid work (women tend to work part-time, men tend to work full time), in different types of paid work (say, women in nursing, men in construction), and have different average earnings from paid work;

⁶ Support egalitarianism and equality and as radical left wingers are usually Maoist and Marxist supporters.

based movements and hierarchical structures). They therefore supported leaderless groupings, job-sharing and structurelessness.

Many of their aspirations have been ridiculed or misunderstood by others and radical feminists are all too often sent up as dungareed, man-hating lesbians, totally obsessed with the politically correct, partly because the way in which they wanted to shape their own movement was intended to reflect their rejection of anything that smacked of the male political imperative.

Notable advocates:

Mary Daly was an advocate of this theory. She was the first feminist philosopher who challenged gender roles and launched war against patriarchy. 'Gyn/Ecology: *The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) Daly argues that men have tried to oppress women throughout history and focuses on the actual practices of this oppression.'

Time Period:

Arose during the second wave of feminism in 1960's. Examples of activism include the Miss America Protest of 1969 which was attended by 400 feminists who tossed false eyelashes and mops into a "Freedom trash can". Thus the bra burning trope of feminists was created.

Salient features:

1. Women are being seen as the "other" to the male norm and so they have been systematically oppressed and marginalized over the course of humanity.
2. Believe in patriarchal theory. It's primary element is the relationship of dominance as males (as a class) are dominant and exploit females suppressed. Radical feminists were opposed to patriarchy but not necessarily capitalism.
3. They try to abolish patriarchy by challenging existing norms.
4. Believed in expanding reproductive rights such as right to abortion, sterilisation, birth control and the freedom to make these choices without pressure from men or governmental and religious authorities.
5. They think sexuality is the root cause of oppression and women are oppressed by the sex industry (prostitution, pornography e.t.c) as women from the lowest

socioeconomic classes engage in prostitution.⁷ It is a forced choice with no independent decision from the women who are forced to accept it due to issues such as past trauma etc.

6. They believe that pornography leads to psychological, physical and economic coercion and leads to sexism and then rape. It also mentions that well known participants of the industry are raped or pimped.⁸
7. Radical lesbians are different from radical feminists as they believe in political lesbianism and believe it is an act of resistance against the political institution of heterosexuality.

CRITICISM

- I. It does not address issues of race and class.
- II. It reinforces the idea of gender essentialism and that "men are acting only as men when they oppress females."⁹
- III. Radical feminist academic scholarship is often highly partisan (more so than other groups) and even invents statistics e.g radical feminist "scholars" on witchcraft have in the past claimed that 9 million women were killed in the European witch trials which is outright fraudulent.
- IV. Radical feminism often resorts to violence and proclaims hate speech. This hate speech can be seen in the SCUM Manifesto
- V. Radical feminists methods for resolving tensions are impractical and inhumane. Gender segregation would not only be farcical in practicality but would contradict most if not all human rights legislation. It is impossible to change the structures without involving men.

4. Marxist/Socialist Feminism

It is primarily concerned with the division of labor. Socialist or Marxist feminism links changes in women's social conditions with the overthrow of industrial capitalism and changing relations of the worker to the means of production. For them, revolution is the

⁷ "If prostitution is a free choice, why are the women with the fewest choices the ones most often found doing it?" -MacKinnon

⁸ Example of Linda Lovelace from Deep Throat who was raped, beaten and pimped by her husband

⁹ The idea that men and women are inherently different.

only answer.¹⁰ Socialist/Marxist feminists are always mindful of the ways society is driven by class and race distinctions as well as those of gender. They believe that it is more useful to consider oppression as multi-pronged and inter-related rather than arguing that one form is more destructive than others. In common with liberal feminism, socialist feminism (because of its links to Marxist thought) suggests a necessary link with men and an acceptance perhaps that men are part of any movement for change.

Perspectives of Engels on women:

- Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private property and the State* says that the shift from feudalism to private land ownership has led to women being denied access to waged labour as they are in enslavement to men who own the land.
- The idea of female sexual morality (fixation on sexual purity and violent punishment of women who commit adultery) demands that women be submissive to their husbands. It is a result of the exclusive control of private property by the leaders of the rising slave owner class in the ancient mode of production, and their demand that their inheritance is passed only to their own offspring. Chastity and fidelity are rewarded because they guarantee exclusive access to the sexual and reproductive faculty of women possessed by men from the property-owning class.

Time Period:

Rose in the 1960's and 1970's.

Salient features:

1. Women's oppression is through the family as her reproductive labor is not recognised and it is exploited. Even though home is the center of production and women carry out productive labor.¹¹
2. It is a two-pronged theory that broadens and argues that capitalism leads to the oppression of women and reinforces radical feminism's theory of the role of gender and the patriarchy.

¹⁰ Although socialist feminists have become cynical about the prospect of a socialist revolution changing the lives of women.

¹¹ According to Mary Inman in her book *In Woman's Defense*

3. Focused on liberating by improving their material condition as women are oppressed due to financial dependence on men.
4. Revolved around taking the "burden" off women in regards to housework, cooking, and other traditional female domestic jobs
5. Subordination is not result of biological factors but social positions—relationship b/w men and women & relationship b/w proletariat and bourgeoisie.
6. Power is a result of sex and class and is manifested materially and ideologically in patriarchy and class relations.
7. Liberalism feminism would undermine the efforts of Marxism to improve conditions of working class.

CRITICISM

- I. It focuses only on economic reasons and focuses on solving those issues.
- II. The root cause, patriarchy, is not addressed.
- III. Changing the economic structure cannot change the mindset.

5. Psychoanalytical Feminism

Freud is the founder of the Psychoanalytic school. Freud writes in his lecture on "Femininity" that "psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition"¹². He believes that femininity is one trajectory of the Oedipal Complex¹³ and indicates that sexed identity is a fragile achievement rather than a natural given or essence. Freud believed that penis envy leads women to shame, vanity etc making her inferior to men. For women a baby is the ultimate penis substitute.

Salient features:

- They are critical of Freudian and neo-Freudian notions of women as biologically, physically, and morally inferior to men.

¹² Bisexual means that the child is not yet a male or a female

¹³ Male child experiences libidinal attraction to his mother and sees her lack of penis as castration and worries father will castrate him due to his attraction and desire for the mother. The same male child then identifies with the father's power and transfers his attraction to other females.

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- They addressed political and social factors affecting the development of male and female subjects.
 - The two major schools of psychoanalytic feminism are Freudian and Lacanian. Freudian feminists, mostly Anglo-American, are more concerned with the production of male dominance and the development of gendered subjects in societies where women are responsible for mothering, whereas Lacanian feminists, mostly French, analyze links between gendered identity and language.
 - Psychoanalytic feminists see women's oppression rooted within psychic structures and reinforced by the continual repetition the dynamics formed in infancy and childhood
 - Because of these deeply ingrained patterns, psychoanalytic feminists wanted to alter the experiences of early childhood and family relations, as well as linguistic patterns, that produce and reinforce masculinity and femininity.
 - Some want to introduce dual parenting (Dorothy Dinnerstein)¹⁴

Notable advocates:

- In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow, argues that different experiences in infancy predispose girls and boys toward different developmental paths. Boys definitively separating from their mothers to identify with the father's social power and girls developing a more symbiotic/continuous sense of self in relation to the mother.
- These relational dynamics emphasize autonomy and separation. It makes boys emotionally stunted and less capable of intimate personal relationships, but better prepared for public life.
- Girls develop a closer relation with their mother, and have more fluid psychic boundaries that facilitate a greater capacity for intimacy but leave them less prepared to negotiate the public sphere.

¹⁴ Her theory summarised: People have a "tendency to blame women for everything wrong about ourselves" because it is mother who bears us, raises us, and presides over us. With the implementation of dual parenting gender roles and arrangements may be forgotten. Man will no longer be the sole "mighty world-builder" or breadwinner, nor will woman be the sole nurturer, or "mother-goddess" answerable to anything that goes wrong.

6. Men's Feminism

Men's Feminism emerged at the time of the Women's Liberation Movement, and the groupings were as different as early radical feminist groups. In a sense they all seemed to be a reaction to feminism.

The task of this feminist attitude is to study men in their relationship to women and to treat both as a gender. They believe in scrutinizing masculinity and to develop a theory of masculinity. Men's consciousness raising (CR) groups, emerging during the early 1970s and they generally had a benign relationship with feminism and women.

There was an acknowledgement that all men had at least the potential to be the oppressor and had greater opportunities for power, and therefore it was important that men got together in their own separatist groups to discuss the effects this knowledge had upon them as individuals. Dominant men create a hegemonic masculinity and so they also oppresses other men (such as homosexual men). Gender inequality is due to these dominant men.

7. Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern and post-structuralist interventions in the field bring to bear diversity to what can be understood as 'feminist'. Core ideas about being a 'woman' and 'inequality' are held up for scrutiny. The idea of an essential female political identity (the transparent oppressor/oppressed relationship of power) are shown through broader questions by asking how meanings and truths are generated in social discourse.

Notable advocates:

Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva

Salient features:

1. Focused on the issues in structure of society (Male and female division) as the social order is built on the concept of two genders.
2. Male writing is full of binary opposition e.g good/bad and propaganda is made through language and females are oppressed through the use of this propaganda.

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3. Women are defined as other and equality will only result when there is no difference among sexes.
 4. It accepts diversity. Queer theory presented by the postmodern feminists as it focuses on other discourses which show multiple roles, truths and entities.
 5. Female & male bodies, sexual desires are exhibited through these discourses. Media glorifies homosexuality without questioning gender description through Queer theory.

CRITICISM

- i. Men and women are two separate entities but they are reduced to one single identity
- ii. Romanticizes women's interaction