

## WOMEN'S LIBERATION

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**Abstract**

*Here are various approaches to the solution of the problem of liberating a woman from her degrading social bondage. Each of them follows its path to raise a woman's status so that she may be the equal of a man. The approaches are Moderate feminism, Radical feminism and Socialist feminism, and they are found in the women's liberation movement which is spreading throughout the world. The adherents of the latter two approaches believe that revolution is necessary to liberate women and to attain equality with men. Radical feminists pleaded for the sexual revolution and socialist feminists work for economic and political revolution. Moderate feminists, on the other hand, do not find it necessary to resort to sexual or eco-political revolution to improve the condition of women. They believe in social reform and a change of social values and attitudes. In India, radical and socialist feminist groups are relative of recent origin and they are few and scattered far and wide. As against that, moderate feminism has a fairly long history in India and it continues to dominate the women's liberation movement. The leaders of the moderate feminist groups function as spokespersons of the Indian women.*

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## **Introduction**

Women constitute almost one-half of the world's population. But their social, economic and political status is lower than that of men in all countries-be in the U.S.A. or U.K., U.S.S.R. or China, India, or Iran. Of course, women do enjoy a better position in some societies than in others. They enjoy a better status in the Russian society than in that of Indians. Their social status in a given society depends upon the particular role assigned to women and the social attitudes of the society were evolved towards that role. However, in course of history the role-ideal, expected or actual is not static in any society. It changes from time to time depending upon the economic conditions and political structure of the society. Social values of the people change with changes in the economic structure and ideology. The committee on the status of women in India observes, "Patterns of Women's activity are greatly affected by social attitudes and institutions, which stem from the social ideology" concerning basic components of status in any given period. These may differ according to the stage of economic development. For example, at certain stages of development, work capacity may provide the highest claim to status. At other stages, when society becomes inegalitarian, leisure may substitute work as a basic indicator of status. On the one hand, women had been kept out of the occupational activity as a bread earner and on the other hand, on the pretext of the biological ground, she has been compelled to become a wife and mother. The allocation of child-rearing responsibility to women," Margaret Polatnick argued, is no sacred fate of nature, but a social policy that supports male domination in the society and the family. Whatever the intrinsic desirability of rearing children the conditions of the job as it's now constituted- no salary, low status, long hours, domestic isolation-mark it as a job for women only. Man, as the subordinate group, don't want child-rearing responsibility, so they assign it to women. Women's functioning as child rearers reinforces, in turn, their subordinate position.

However, evidence also shows that woman was not always inferior to man in the history of human civilization. In the early periods when there were neither clan nor family system women enjoyed equal status with man. In fact, according to some anthropologists, she enjoyed a superior position in the early stage of human civilization. Briffault observes. The primitive human female, like the animal female, is far more wary, sagacious and ingenious than the male, who is dull and stupid by comparison. Her maternal functions have in the course of a long evolution developed alertness. Circumspection, ingenuity, a constructive attitude, which is foreign to masculine development. The female is accordingly in primitive conditions, not only the equal intellectually of the male, but often his actual superior... it is no wonder that the

savage habitually goes to his womenfolk for advice. Woman's position changed as the social structure changed from communal to matriarchal, and from matriarchal to patriarchal. The non-Marxist scholars however emphasize culture and observe that woman's status has changed in human history as culture changed. Ralph Linton, the non-Marxist Sociologist, observes: "All societies prescribe different attitudes and activities to men and women. Most of them try to rationalize these prescriptions in terms of the physiological differences between the sexes of their differences in reproduction. However, a comparative study of the status ascribed to women and men in different cultures seems to show that while such factors may have served as a starting point for the development of a division the actual ascriptions are almost entirely determined by culture. Thus, the woman is biologically not inferior to the man. Her present-day inferior position is the result of the socio-cultural arrangement of the sexes based on power and privileges. Such a perspective is also central to the formation of the women's liberation movement.

#### **Approaches of Women's Liberation**

Social scientists and women activists both accept the main postulate that a woman is not biologically inferior and her lower social status to that of man is man-made. However, their approach to the cause of women's liberation differs. These approaches have resulted in the formulation of different theories to explain how woman's position was relegated to a lower status in the course of the development of civilization. Broadly speaking there are three theories: (1) Moderate of Women's Rights Feminism (2) Radical Feminism (3) Social Feminism. They all maintain that the social inequalities between man and woman are a creation of the socio-cultural milieu. And, in turn, these theories have inspired several women's liberation movements all over the world.

#### **Moderate or Women's Rights Feminism**

The inferior position of women, according to the supporters of this theory, is due to cultural and psychological factors. John Stuart Mill, one of the earlier thinkers of the school, championed the cause of women. He was a liberal "individualistic in intellectual matters, and also in economics. He was also a utilitarian, advocating Bentham's dictum, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. " His book, *The Subjection of Women* (1861) has become a landmark in the history of the women's movement. Wendell Carr writes in 1970, "What the *Wealth of Nations* is for classical liberalism, *Das Kapital* for socialism, *The Subjection of Women* is for the century-old agitation for women's rights. It provided the movement with a philosophic rationale of cosmic proportions and more than a century after its publication, stands unchallenged as the most distinguished intellectual monument the cause has yet

produced. The present-day Women's Liberation movement is not soon likely to surpass it.

Mill believed that man and woman have their peculiar abilities. These abilities are not superior or inferior but they are "reciprocal". Mill wrote to his friend "we are almost as much the natural complement of one another as man and woman are: we are far stronger together than separately, whatever both of us agree in, has a very good chance, think, of being true." Though he believed in equality, he assigned a certain role to a woman which suited her more than man. In 1832 he wrote to Harriet that "the great occupation of woman should be to beautify life: to cultivate, for her own sake and that of those who surround her, all her faculties of mind, soul, and body; all her powers of enjoyment, and powers of giving enjoyment; to diffuse beauty, elegance, grace everywhere."

Like other liberals, he believed that equality between the two sexes can be brought about by moral reforms, education and legal measures. Mill took an active interest in bringing Enlightenment to women. He advocated women's suffrage and granting legal rights to women. While Disraeli's Reform Bill of 1867 in Parliament he read "person" instead of man. In 1850 he singled out women's rights as "the most important" of "all practical subjects"; and in 1871 he called the condition of woman a "still more fundamental question than nationalization of land and the relationship between labor and capital. At his death, he left £6000, nearly half his total estate for women's education. Other Western liberal thinkers expressed more or less similar views regarding women's inferior position. Some of them like Bertraza Russell blamed Christianity for its repressive views of sex and marriage for degrading women's position. Therefore they protested against 'sex morality'.

Mahatma Gandhi also took a somewhat similar approach towards women's problems. He strongly criticized "excessive subordination of the wife to the husband. the woman should enjoy equal status with the man. voice against customs and pleaded for women's education. However, he believed that the main role of a woman is to be a mother and housewife. He said, "whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two, Hence the vocations of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities that men need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread-winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct." He also believed "let us be happy in the state to which we are born and do the duty for which nature has

destined us” Gandhi approved of the women who voluntarily work outside their home, he emphasized that women’s primary function is to look after the home. Like Mill, he also mobilized women for participation in public life.

Unlike Gandhi, moderate feminists in the West do not believe in strict segregation of the roles between men and women. Betty Friedman opines that as long as women are relegated to being mothers and mothers only, “Motherhood is a bane and a curse”. The oppressive function of the present-day family can be removed when women develop as equal human beings. This is possible only when other lifestyles are made available to women.

The moderates accept the philosophy of liberal ideology. According to them, in a pluralist society, no one group dominates and determines government policy. “Organised women can get into the game and, like other groups, can expect to have their demands met if they put on enough pressure a Women have to work as a pressure group in the pluralist society. They have to pressurize the government to women’s liberalization.

### **Radical Feminism**

Radical feminism belongs to the glorious days of the 1960s and its aftermath. It differentiates consciously between men and women. Often considered strident, it sometimes takes the form of gynocriticism (stress on new models centered on women’s experience). Radical feminism relates to the universal nature of patriarchy and stresses the fact that men play an important part in oppressing women. Eva Figs’s book *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) focused on the fact that patriarchal culture, philosophy, religion and morality of any society. In all walks of life, women are taken to be inferior and subordinate to men. Women are, hence, encouraged to assume an oppositional stance.

The works of activists such as Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone resulted in radical feminism developing a systematic theory of sexual oppression, which is considered to be the most fundamental feature of society. Gender is the most politically significant and deepest social cleavage Millett saw the roots of patriarchy in social conditioning, whereas Firestone located them in biology. Both agreed that gender differences between men and women should be abolished. In France and the United States, however, a different brand of radical feminism arose, which believed that women should not try to be more like men, they should recognize and embrace their femininity and sisterhood.

To this mold of feminism belongs the famous person is a political equation. The personal refers to the domestic sphere (family, domestic work and child-rearing) where a woman is as oppressed as in the public sphere (the job market, for instance).

If that is the personal, the other half of the equation, the political, refers to the power sexual relations give men in controlling women through institutions such as family, and through models of socialization that reproduce patriarchy. Hence, violence is one of the themes this version of feminism explores. An aspect of this power is the constitution of women as sexual playthings by and for men. Certain radical feminists, hence, promote lesbianism as a non-oppressive relationship. The fulcrum of their argument is the notion of social control. Radical feminism analyses how patriarchy generates the threat of violence, and how the actual violent behavior by men act as controlling agents constructing women's behaviors and freedom. Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, Shulamith Firestone and Adrienne Rich are some of the names associated with this version of feminism.

The problem with this form of feminism could be that it presents patriarchy as a monolith, as a given that never changes according to the contexts of economic/production relations. Such essentializing results in a historical definition of femininity and masculinity, Nor can it make feminism an enabling force. Rather, it remains confrontationist feminism. Moreover, as it stresses the uniqueness of feminist oppression, building bridges with the other oppressed might be difficult.

### **Marxist/Socialist Feminism**

To a certain extent, early feminists subscribed to socialist ideas. Socialist feminism came to the fore only in the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike the exclusionary position of radical feminism, which maintains that "only the wearer knows when shoe pinches," Marxist/socialist feminism posits a link between patriarchy and capitalism. Female oppression is in this paradigm a result of ideological dominion that emerges out of economic oppression. Thus, socialist feminists do not believe that women simply face disadvantages that can be remedial. They argue that the economic and social structure dictates the relationship between the sexes and that patriarchy is understood in the light of social and economic factors. According to Friedrich Engels (in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*), the development of capitalism and the emergence of private property changed the position of women. In pre-capitalist societies, the inheritance of property and social position through the female line, or the mother right, was prevalent. Capitalism brought with it the ownership of private property, generally owned by men and resulted in the historical defeat of the female sex. Engels believed that female oppression operated through the deinstitution of family. The bourgeois family is patriarchal and oppressive since men tried to ensure that property is passed on only to their sons.

Men achieved undisputed paternity by insisting on female monogamy. It has been argued that capitalism resulted in the confinement of women to the domestic

sphere and that women constitute reserve labor' that can be utilized without burdening the economy or the state. Moreover, women are generally temporary workers and forced to accept low-paid and low-status jobs and do not pose a threat to 'men's jobs. In their role as housewives, women relieve men of the burden of housework and child-rearing, which allows men to concentrate on productive employment.

### **Postmodernist Feminism:**

The earlier theories of feminizes look at gender class and the class-gender, equation. However, it has become difficult to discuss feminism only in terms of liberal, socialist, or radical feminism. There has been a merging of these theories and ideas, and new forms of femininity have also emerged. One of these forms is postmodern or post-structural feminism Postmodern feminism takes up various issues, such as cultural feminism black feminism and lesbian feminism. Dalit feminism in India, for instance, would be different from middle-class mainstream feminism.

The other possibilities in postmodernist feminism are as follows;

### **The post-feminism**

Sociological literature maintains that as the radical sections of feminists seemed to go out of control, there ensued a backlash against feminism that was strengthened due to the conservative mold of the 1970s and 1990s Popular outlook, aided by simplistic media presentation, added to such a backlash by maintaining that there cannot be anyone theory of feminine deprivation. Each woman has her unique narrative to tell. The postmodernist narratology is also seen to be supporting such a stance.

### **Power-feminism**

Power feminism takes the diametrically opposite position to post-feminism. It believes in rejecting the victim mode of existence Women are encouraged to try all possible opportunities of empowering themselves. At all levels, from individuals to the community, this empowering process is engendered. In other words, there is a solution to optimism and positive thinking

Other forms of feminisms are also emerging, which enable themselves by equating and aligning their struggles with battles against certain social phenomena, such as environmental destruction. The Chipko movement, Medha Patkar's NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan) and Vandana Shiva's eco-feminist arguments against such destructions of the environment are some examples of such an awareness. In such a mode of discussing social realities, certain problems, such as water scarcity become a woman's question, as in the Third World contexts. It is women as family makers and agricultural laborers who bear the brunt of water management disasters

and, therefore, take a keen interest in such problems.

Marx and Engels themselves rejected any rigid and mechanistic notion of determinism. Historical forces, racial relations, habits and cultural norms, religious views, nature of the class struggle, etc., influence social institutions and social relationships. Cultural overtone continues even after the revolution in the mode of production. Moreover, one should also not overemphasize the idea that domestic labor by women leads to lowering their status in society. That is, a common kitchen and modern technological gadgets for domestic work would give them social status equal to that of man. Russian experience suggests that domestic labor or market labor cannot substantially change a woman's status so long as the patriarchal social system continues. And the patriarchal system cannot vanish by merely abolishing private property. Thus, women's struggle for their emancipation has to be both against private property as well as against the patriarchal social system. Therefore, class struggle by the struggle. Women have the class not a substitute for women's in collaboration too with the working class but have to wage their particular struggle independent of the working class. A struggle against the patriarchal system is a struggle against the present structure of the family and the system of man-dominated social values which prevail in working-class trade unions and left political parties as well. Thus, without a change in the relations of production, women's liberation would remain an ideal. And without a change in the patriarchal social system and all the social values that go with them, the liberation of women would not be complete.

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