

17

Feminism: A Critical Study of Equality, Identity, and Social Transformation

Dr. Mrinali Kankar¹ & Dr. Vishal Gauttam^{2*}

¹Assistant Professor, Department of ABST, Kanoria PG Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Jaipur.

²Assistant Professor, Department of ABST, S. S. Jain Subodh PG College, Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: dr.vishalgauttam13@gmail.com

Abstract

Since its earliest articulations in the eighteenth century, the intellectual tradition and social movement of feminism has undergone profound transformation. This paper aims to conduct a thorough critical analysis of the concept of feminism, with the historical evolution of it through four waves and a study of its main theoretical strands namely liberal, radical, socialist, postmodern, ecofeminist and intersectional and mapping them in the context of the socio-political context of Indian and post colonial feminism. It is contended in the paper that feminisms are not a unified ideology but a pluralistic and continually developing project for equality, dignity and justice, which has to grapple with the intermingling structures of patriarchy, caste, class, race and colonialism. This is an analysis of current issues such as digital activism, elite feminism and internal exclusions, showing how the unfinished democratic project of feminism continues to grow in relevance in global and local fields.

Keywords: Feminism, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism, Dalit Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Equality, Waves of Feminism, Ecofeminism.

Introduction

At a basic level, feminism is the equality of men and women in society, politics and the economy. But this seemingly straightforward definition obscures the immense complexity of a movement that has been waging a struggle for centuries, across continents, and that has produced some of the most significant theoretical and practical challenges to the power of patriarchy in history. Feminism isn't just about women versus men, as bell hooks has famously said, it's about making a world in which all can live freely and fully without the distortions of a sexist oppression. This paper critically examines the political and theoretical development of feminism as a lived social movement from the suffragist movement of the nineteenth century to the digitally networked twenty first century.

Femininity must be taken into account in the study of feminism. But there is not one single feminism, but rather feminisms, diverse and sometimes conflicting, always in specific historical and cultural settings. The diversity has traditionally been structured in terms of successive waves, each reacting to the incomplete concerns of its predecessor and raising new issues, new approaches, and new constituencies in western feminist historiography. In addition to this wave story, there have been theoretical currents that each attempt to diagnose the causes of gender inequality and to propose different remedies. Moreover, with a growing engagement with feminist scholarship on the Global South, it has had to confront its own universalizing tendencies and to take note of the insights of postcolonial, Dalit and intersectional perspectives that refuse to separate out gender oppression from caste, class, race and religion and the ongoing legacy of colonialism.

Relationship with other social movements: Stages of Feminism

Although the wave metaphor has been criticized for its western and linear approach, it is useful as an organizing principle to examine the historical progression of feminist activism. Although coined by Martha Weinman Lear in a 1968 article in the New York Times, this periodization has come to be accepted in feminist studies.

The first wave of feminism began around the mid-nineteenth century and lasted until the early 20th century, focusing mainly on giving women formal political rights, such as that of voting. The movement is traditionally dated from the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 in New York, at which three hundred women and men met to discuss Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments, which listed women's grievances and their demand for suffrage. The movement became more active in Britain when a petition on behalf of women's suffrage was presented to Parliament in 1866. This wave is, however, based on the intellectual foundations that precede these organised campaigns. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which contained one of the first extended philosophical defenses of women's rational equality with men. The main goal of the first wave, the goal that was achieved, was the granting of women's suffrage in many countries, including the U.S., in 1920, and Britain, in 1928. But the movement has been rightly attacked for its disproportionate emphasis on white, middle class women and for ignoring women of colour and working class women.

In the early 1960s, a second wave of feminism began that continued through the 1980s that shifted the focus of feminists from formal political equality to cultural, social and economic aspects of women's lives. This wave is generally considered to have been sparked by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Friedan diagnosed 'the problem that has no name' – the all-encompassing malaise of middle-class American women trapped at home – and the book sold 1.4 million copies in three years. The issues discussed by second-wave feminists are workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, domestic violence and the politics of

sexuality. The movement came to teach women that many things in their lives were actually very politicized and a reflection of the sexist power structure, and hence the phrase “the personal is political.” In 1970, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* offered a theoretical approach for grasping patriarchy as a system of male domination that is pervasive and systematic.

The third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s as an extension of and a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of the second wave movement. The novelist Alice Walker's daughter, Rebecca Walker, announced this new wave in 1992 in response to the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, which made sexual harassment a national issue. Third wave feminism had a focus on difference, individuality, and on the deconstruction of generalizations about women's experiences. It took intersectionality as a key analytic tool, recognized the fluidity of gender and sexuality, and aimed to include women of colour, queer women, and women from the Global South, marginalized by the predominantly white, middle class emphasis of second wave feminism.

The fourth wave of feminism started in the mid-2010s and till now, it is characterised by the use of digital tools and social media as instruments of mobilisation. The wave is personified by mass online campaigns, such as the #MeToo movement, which was created by black activist Tarana Burke in 2006 and gained country-wide traction in 2017 when various allegations of sexual misconduct against film producer Harvey Weinstein surfaced. At least nineteen million people used the hashtag on Twitter (formerly X), alone, indicating the unprecedented level of digitally mediated feminist consciousness. An important aspect of the fourth wave of feminism is also body positivity and trans-inclusivity, the movement itself no longer being restricted to the concerns of previous waves.

Major Theoretical Strands

Feminist theory has always been pluralistic. Instead, it comprises a variety of intellectual traditions, each producing a different diagnosis of the sources of gender inequality and a different cure. It is crucial to be familiar with these theoretical strands as they are the ones that have fueled the inner debates that have shaped the thinking and practice of feminists.

The oldest of the major traditions is liberal feminism, which is focused on gender equality via legal and political change. At the heart of its advocacy lies the fact that women are subjected to barriers (such as discriminatory laws, unequal access to education and employment, and lack of political participation) and that lifting those barriers will give women the opportunity to compete with men. Liberal feminism focuses on individual rights and equal opportunities; it includes campaigns for equal pay laws, anti-discrimination laws, increased access to education and professional opportunities. Despite its great legislative success, liberal feminisms

have been criticized for playing down the structural and cultural forces behind gender oppression, and relying on the notion of formal equality as the key to women's liberation.

Radical feminism holds that the very system of patriarchy, the domination of men in the law, the political system, the family, in language and sexuality, is the cause of women's oppression. The problem is systemic, and thus, according to the radical feminists, reform is not enough, but a fundamental change of social institutions is needed, including the abolition of the traditional nuclear family as one of the central locations of women's subordination. Radical feminism introduced reproductive rights, sexual violence, politics of body etc. in the feminist agenda but faced criticism that it was using the category of 'woman' as a universal category which masked the differences between women as determined by race, class and caste.

Socialist feminism (also known in its more class-determinist forms as Marxist feminism) is a feminist theory that draws on Marxist thought and posits the entwinement of gender oppression and class exploitation. In this analysis, women's subordination is related to their economic dependence on males and their unpaid role of producing the labour force, through child-rearing and household maintenance. In this support, gender equality is impossible without dismantling capitalism as well since it relies upon women's unpaid and underpaid labour. In this way, socialist feminism frames the fight for women's liberation as part of a larger push for social and economic change.

Judith Butler is a theoretician of postmodern feminism who works to deconstruct "woman" as a stable, biological identity. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler suggests that gender is not the expression of a pre-existing essence, but rather a performance; a repetition of acts and discourses that give the appearance of a fixed gender identity. This theoretical shift undermined the values of the existing feminist tradition, which had assumed that all women share a common experience and that this experience forms the basis for political unity. Postmodern feminism created a new approach to seeing the materiality and social construction of gender, sexuality and identity, but it has been criticised for its abstraction and its ability to make discourses of what it means to be a woman.

Ecofeminism, as emphasised by Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* (1988), makes a connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature; both are based in the same logic of patriarchy, exploitation and control. The Indian context is central to Shiva's work and her understanding of the interconnection of environmental degradation, the marginalisation of women's knowledge systems and the destructive effects of developmentalism leads her to propose a feminist ecological ethic of sustenance, diversity, and interdependence. Ecofeminism has gained significant traction in the Indian context, where the environment is being

destroyed disproportionately by women who are directly involved in agriculture, water collection and forest management.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her now famous essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Crenshaw showed that even though the law has historically been used to define the boundaries of sex discrimination based on a white woman's experience, and race discrimination based on a black man's experience, black women have been omitted from the law by virtue of being both. In "Mapping the Margins" (two years later), Crenshaw expanded on this to demonstrate how the organisation of social movements against violence against women fundamentally ignored the precarious position of women of colour, especially of those who are immigrants and/or underprivileged. Intersectionality thus argues that gender can only be understood in relation to other social divisions such as race, class, caste, sexuality, and so on, and that any feminism that does not consider these intersections risks reenacting the very exclusions it purports to contest.

Indian and Postcolonial Feminism

Historically Indian feminisms are in a unique position in the global context, influenced by multiple factors such as caste, class, religion, colonialism and nationalism which are distinct from the Western feminist continuum. Indian feminism has been closely allied with the collective struggle against social divisions rather than with the struggle for personal rights and legal equality as was the case with early western feminism, specifically, with battles for the collective struggle against caste oppression, economic exploitation, and colonial rule. It is not just an outgrowth of western feminist concepts, but is related to pre-colonial spiritual movements, socio-religious reform works, anti-caste activities and women's involvement in the national freedom struggle.

Feminist concerns merged with social reformist and nationalist agendas during the colonial era. Reform campaigns including the abolition of sati (1829), widow remarriage and the promotion of education for women were couched in a colonial discourse that frequently relied upon the "oppressed Indian woman" to validate imperial rule. This made Indian women the subject of reform, but also the object of colonial representation, resulting in a complex dynamic. Postcolonial feminist theory, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty pointed out in her groundbreaking 1988 essay "Under Western Eyes", is critical of the way western feminist scholarship can create a singular, powerless, "Third World woman" that eradicates the agency, diversity, and struggles of women in the Global South.

Indian feminism in the post-independence period expanded to engage with caste, class, religious and regional structural inequalities. Dalit feminism has been a strong critique of upper-caste patriarchy and also mainstream feminisms' neglect of

the specific patterns of oppression faced by Dalit women as a result of the cumulative effect of caste and gender oppression. The model for the “modern Indian womanhood” was created by oppressor-caste men for oppressor-caste women, centred around the values of nationalism and colonial patronage, and this model was used to mask caste differences in the broader category of anti-colonial nationalism. This “re-brahminisation” swept the feminist movements into the nationalist camps and engulfed feminist theorisation in the immediate aftermath of independence. Taking the lead from B. R. Ambedkar’s anti-caste movement, Dalit feminism believes that the fight against patriarchy is inextricably linked with the fight against caste, and that a feminism which speaks only for upper-caste women is reinforcing the hierarchy it is fighting.

Adivasi feminism and Muslim feminism, too, have expanded the terrain of Indian feminist discourse, by explaining how tribal women and Muslim women who are situated in the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and economic marginalisation are vulnerable. The postcolonial feminist investigation has also focused on the notion of “double colonisation”, that is, the oppression of colonised women under both the colonial and indigenous patriarchies. This framework illustrates the limitations of one-axis analysis and the need to focus on the various and overlapping power structures affecting women’s lives in postcolonial societies.

The Present Relevance and Problems

Feminism has many different facets and is relevant in today’s world in almost every aspect of social, political, and economic life. Feminist advocacy has played a key role in increasing girls’ access to education and in tackling stereotypical curricula and pedagogical practices. At work, there has been marked legislative progress, but the gender pay gap remains, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and women are still heavily burdened with unpaid caring responsibilities. Feminist activism has made sexual harassment, domestic violence, and reproductive autonomy issues of public political contestation and legal control, rather than private issues.

With the digital revolution, new feminisms have emerged. With the advent of social media, feminist movements have been able to mobilise like never before, cross national lines and create transnational solidarity. The #Metoo movement, the Women’s March, and many local campaigns and events have shown how digital networks can provide a platform to give voice to the voiceless and to shift the accountability of powerful individuals and institutions. Meanwhile, the online landscape has been a place rife with backlash, harassment and weaponisation of social media against women activists and journalists.

However, there are many internal and external challenges for feminism. The critique of “elite feminism” (feminism that discusses issues that pertain to interests of

privileged women while ignoring material issues of poor, Dalit, Adivasi and minority women) is an ongoing concern, especially in the Indian context. The universalistic thinking of the west remains dominant in the international feminist conversation, and at the cost of the particular histories and struggles of women from the Global South. Patriarchy is not a thing of the past, but a living, dynamic, and adaptive power: the backlash against feminism is illustrated by the emergence of misogynist online communities and the repeal of reproductive rights in some places. Moreover, discussions in the feminist movement around trans women of color, struggles over the commercialization of feminist terminology, and conflicts between cultural relativism and universalism have sparked fruitful yet conflictual debates.

Conclusion

As this critical study has shown, feminism, as a concept and as a process, is no monolithic ideology nor a finished project. Feminism has been a constant force of change and adaptation, from the suffragist movement of the nineteenth century to the digitally networked activism of the twenty-first, from liberal reformism to radical transformation, from the metropolitan centres of the West to the caste-marked villages of India. This theoretical richness of feminist thought is a result of the complexity of structures that are being challenged and the diversity of the women being represented by feminist thought, including feminist traditions that are liberal, radical, socialist, postmodern, ecofeminist and intersectional. The Indian and postcolonial feminisms have played an invaluable role in this work in pointing out that gender cannot be conceived in isolation from caste, class, race, colonialism and religion. The problems of feminism – of elite capture, of western universalism, of internal exclusion, of patriarchy's backlash – are not a measure of its failure but of its continuing engagement with a world of vast inequality. At its best, feminism — like democracy and humanity — is an unfinished project, a process of struggle, not only for women's rights but a world in which all people, women and men, of all castes, classes, races, and sexualities, can live with dignity, freedom, and full human agency.

References

1. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
2. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
3. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
4. Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company.
5. History.com. (2022, March 2). What are the four waves of feminism? <https://www.history.com/articles/feminism-four-waves>

6. hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.
7. Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual politics*. Doubleday.
8. Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30(1), 61–88.
9. Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology, and development*. Zed Books.
10. Social Science Journal. (2026). Indian feminism: Indigenous roots and global influence. <https://www.socialsciencejournal.net/assets/archives/2026/vol8issue1/8004.pdf>
11. The Conversation. (2024, March 7). What are the four waves of feminism? And what comes next? <https://theconversation.com/what-are-the-four-waves-of-feminism-and-what-comes-next-224153>
12. Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. Joseph Johnson.

