

SEMESTER II
Paper IX: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN POLITICAL
THEORY

FEMINISM

PSC-C204

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Feminism : History

- As apolitical theory covers a wide range of distinct issues and challenges
- Feminism is a collection of beliefs and ideologies that believe that 1. women are disadvantaged in comparison to men , 2) this disadvantage can and should be overthrown.
- Thus unlike traditional political theories feminism examines the inequalities between men and women as central political issues.
- But feminism is not a unified ideology but contains several competing strands

Contd..

- These are identifies as :
- Liberal feminism
- Marxist feminism
- Radical feminism
- Black feminism
- Post-modern feminism

Origins

- The term feminism came to use during 1890s but its origins can be traced to late 17th century.
- The early capitalist development marked a change in the legal and economic position of women
- The arbitrary power of men was challenged
- Mary Wollstonecraft's '*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' (1792)is considered as the first modern expression of liberal feminism.

Evolution of Feminism:

Ist Wave Feminism

- The growth of feminism is described in terms of waves.

1. Ist Wave Feminism : Mid 19th century to early 20th century

- Focus on women's demands for equal legal and political rights as men like . female suffrage , right to property, rights to marriage and divorce, custody of children.
- Access to education and workplace .
- Mary Astell , British feminist argues for equal ability of men and women.
- Her argument was that if rationality was a trait of human beings women too are endowed with rationality like men
- Seneca Falls Convention 1848 marked the women's rights movement
- Mary wollstonecraft, Elizebeth Candy Statson, J.S. Mill, Harriot Taylor
- Movements strong in UK, USA
- This wave ended with achievement of women suffrage in News Zealand (1893); USA (1920); Britain (1928)
- (liberal feminism)

IIInd Wave Feminism : 1960-1970s

- Regenerated in the 1960s
- Betty Friedman's book '*The Feminist Mystique* (1963), relaunched feminist thought.
- Influenced by Simone de Beauvoir '*The Sexual Eunuch*' first published in 1949
- This acknowledged that the Ist wave feminism had not solved the 'women's question'.
- Legal end economic inequalities continued
- Concept of gender was conceptualised.
- Diffence between sex which is a biological cinstuct and gender as a social and cultural construct was raised
- Focussed attention on the personal, psychological and sexual aspects of female oppression
- Betty Friedman, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer
- (Socialist and Radical Feminism emerged)

Third wave feminism(1990s)

- Process of deradicalization
- Led to idea of post feminism
- This suggests that as feminist goals have been achieved, women's movement has moved 'beyond feminism'
- Feminism has moved towards radical diversification .
- Called post-modern feminism, black feminism, ecofeminism (will discuss this in environmentalism lecture)

Core themes (Refer Andrew Heywood)

- Politics of the Personal
- Redefining the political
- Patriarchy
- Sex and Gender
- Equality and difference

Major types of Feminism

- Liberal feminism
- Socialist/ Marxist feminism
- Radical feminism
- Third wave

Liberal feminism

- Early or first wave feminism influenced by liberalism
- Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) argues for same rights for both men and women on the grounds that they are 'human beings'.
- Women should be treated as rational creatures to remove the '*distinction of sex*'
- J.S. Mill's '*On the Subjugation of Women*' (1869)
- Women should have right to vote (political rights like men)

Contd ..

- Based on the principles of individualism . Demand for equality particularly in the public sphere(wider educational and career opportunities)
- They believe in a democratic system and are not opposed to the role of state .
- Criticized for not eliminating difference between public and private

Socialist/ Marxist Feminism

- Gained prominence in the second half of 20th century.
- Focus on class structure of society which created inequality between men and women
- Unlike liberal feminists, socialist feminist emphasise that relationship between sexes is linked to the social and economic structures of society itself.
- Therefore call for profound social change for the emancipation of women

Contd...

- Argument best developed by Friedrich Engels in his book 'The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State' (1884)
- Patriarchy was a product of capitalism. It had overthrown 'mother's right'.
- This resulted in female oppression and sexual repression within the family.
- Therefore patriarchal family to be replaced and emancipation of women by:
 1. 'communal living' (Utopian socialists)
 2. Orthodox Socialist feminists : By larger socialist revolution where capitalism is overthrown. 'Class war' is more important than 'sex war'
 3. Modern Socialist feminists : saw the difficult progress of women in Soviet Union ie Socialism does not end patriarchy.
- They emphasize more on neo-marxism and the interplay of several factors like cultural and ideological emancipation and not simply on economic terms.
- Eg Alexandra Kollantai, Juliet Mitchel

Radical Feminism

- Works of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949); Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, (1970); Eva Figgs's *Patriarchal Attitudes*' (1970); Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*' (1970) revolutionized feminist thinking. Millet provides the first account of theory of patriarchy.
- Patriarchy and gender are the key terms here.
- Gender is a social construct. Patriarchy is strengthened by education, religion, literature and force particularly sexual violence
- Patriarchy was a process of gender oppression
- Radical feminists emphasized on the social disadvantages faced by women due to gender which was the deepest social cleavage more than class, race and religion

- Male domination is not limited only to public but extends to the 'personal' areas like family, and sexual relationships which is central to patriarchy.
- Therefore such male power has to be challenged
- radical feminism encompasses divergent elements like Pro-women position in UK , USA
- This extols the positive virtues of fertility and motherhood. Recognizes bonds that link all women together(common sisterhood) and transcends class or race
- Cultural feminism, ecofeminism, lesbian separatism
- Thus radical feminism is not unified; its central insight is 'personal is political' and patriarchy needs to be understood with other forms of inequality and oppression .

Third Wave feminism(1990s

- Since the 1990s new forms of feminism have emerged which have been called '*third wave feminism*'; '*new feminism*'; *post feminism*
- This was a result of the emergence of new issues in feminist politics and the political and social transformations that second wave feminism had brought about.
- It delves deeper into the politics of difference ie it shows greater concern to the '*differences between women*'.
- It rectifies the over emphasis on middle-class white women of earlier strands of feminism.
- Emphasizes on contemporary voices like low income women, Women in developing world, women of colour.
- 1. **Black feminism** has been most effective challenging conventional forms of feminism ignoring racial differences.
- Strong in USA . Regards sexism and racism as linked forms of oppression.

Contd...

- Reconstruction of women's identities under the influence of poststructuralists (Jacques Derrida)and postmodernists (Michael Foucault
- Poststructuralist or postmodernist feminist question the idea of fixed women identity(eg. not all women can bear children)
- Seek to promote subjectivity
- Exponents Amelia Jones, Christina Hoff Jones, Susan Faludi

- *New feminism* has sought to address the political, economic, social inequalities that disadvantaged women. Separates personal from the political, a rejection of the central feature of second wave. Natasha Walter's *Living Dolls* (2010)
- *Post-feminism: The deradicalization within feminism is more prominent in post feminism*
- This rejects second wave themes rather than remodelling them
- Naomi Wolf's *Fire for fire* (1994) calls women to use 'new female power' to overcome impediments which are more psychological than political.

Feminism in 21st Century

- 4th wave feminism since 2010
- Today most principles fought for seen as entitlements rather than feminist demands
- Disagreements remain
- Impact of globalization has led to transnational sisterhood. Resulted in growth of worldwide women's groups, away from western heartland
- **Postcolonial feminists** particularly argue that women's rights are a western concept and many are not applicable to the non-western world. These undermine traditional institutional and cultural practices.
- This has been criticised by feminists as a defence of patriarchy.
- **Pro-globalization theorists** argue that globalization has opened opportunities for women in developing world with the growth of 'pink-collar jobs'. But this has also resulted in growing vulnerabilities and exploitation of women

Conclusion

- Thus, like other ideologies, feminism also cannot be understood as one cohesive ideology. It has definitely redefined politics and other political ideologies which were based on the experiences , interests and perceptions of a part of human population only.
