

#for the students of Patna University M.A. Semester II (2019-20).

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## **Feminism (Western Views)**

Feminism is a theory that believes that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men enjoy in all spheres of life such as social, economic, religious, political, literary etc. The struggle to have right to equality is the basic tenet of feminism. If we analyse this definition and have a look at the European history we find that women were denied their rights from time immemorial and were put to the margin of the social structure. Western culture had the assumption that women were 'inferior creatures'. Leading thinkers from Aristotle onwards considered women to be lesser beings. They were thought to be intellectually and physically inferior to men. According to John Chrysostom (347AD – 407AD), a Greek ecclesiast, women were "a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil." *Ecclesiastes* states, "All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman." The Roman theologian Terullian (160AD – 230AD) lectured to women, "You are the gateway to the Devil." *The Book of Genesis* blames Eve for the loss of paradise. Alexander Pope asserted, "Most women have no character at all." The great Swiss-born French philosopher Rousseau portrayed women as silly and frivolous creatures. Even the French Revolution which had promised liberty, equality and fraternity to the people also failed to address the legal status of women in *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizens* which had defined French citizenship. There are a lot of writers who thought that man was far superior to woman. And the struggle of women to have equal rights, status and opportunity is also as old as the human civilization. According to the Folk Tradition Adam had a wife named Lilith prior to Eve. According to *Genesis* 2:18 God's words are: "It is not good for man to be alone." God then formed Lilith out of the clay from which he made Adam. Lilith claimed that since she and Adam had been created in the same way, they were equal, and she refused to submit to him and said "I will not lie below." When Adam said, "You are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be superior to you," Lilith responded, "We are equal to each other in as much as we

are both created from this earth.” Lilith refused to surrender herself to Adam and flew away into the air.

Such was the power of the innumerable writers, philosophers, priests and the clerics who unanimously acknowledged the inferiority of women for centuries that women too accepted their lesser status. Women were deprived of education and financial independence. They were only to obey the orders of men. They were confined to the domestic sphere. They were denied the rights to public life. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France, they were still compelled to cover their heads in public, and in parts of Germany, a husband still had the right to sell his wife. Even as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century women could neither vote nor hold elective office in Europe and in most of the parts of the United States of America. Women were prevented from conducting business without a male representative, be it father, brother, husband, legal agent or even son. Married women could not exercise control over their children without the permission of their husbands. As right to access of education was totally denied to them they were debarred from most professions.

All the attributes such as silence, submissiveness, kind heartedness, fear, impunity and a lot of others were thrust upon women. ‘Women’ meant ‘lack of qualities’. Mother was ‘no parent to her child’. Patriarchy was asserted over matriarchy. In order to subjugate women, men made them ‘goddess’, ‘angel’, ‘heavenly wrought’, ‘an object’- all ideal situations denying reality.

Although there is no concrete evidence of early organized protest against the circumscribed status of women, there are scant evidences to prove that women wanted to resist the attempts of the denial of their rights. There are isolated voices against their inferior status. Christine de Pizan, the first French philosopher of the 14<sup>th</sup> century challenged the male attitudes toward women. She gave a call for female education. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Laura Creta, a Venetian woman published *Epistole familiares* (1488; Personal Letters) in which she dealt with a panoply of women’s complaints, from denial of education and marital oppression to the frivolity of women’s attire. Some of the writers like Moderata Fonte, a Venetian woman, asserted that women were not superficial and inherently

immoral rather they can be the intellectual equals of men if they were given equal access to education.

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century England some of the pamphleteers and polemicists talked of the true nature of womanhood. Jane Anger and Mary Astell stressed the need for convents where women might live, study and teach. In the age of Enlightenment women began to demand equality, liberty and natural rights to both the sexes without making any discrimination on any basis.

So far as the theory of equal rights of women is concerned it took the concrete shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. It is a seminal English language feminist work. The notion that women's duty is only to please men was challenged. It was proposed that women should be given equal opportunities in education, work and politics. They should be considered as rational and relevant. Wollstonecraft appealed to women to recognize their abilities that were equal to those of men and to define their identities for themselves, and to carve their roles in the society. She wrote "...the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a *human being*, regardless of the distinction of sex." She argued that the ideals of the French Revolution should also be extended to women through access to education. The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the flowering of numerous literary figures in Europe and America. The important figures include Mme de Stael, Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Elizabeth Browning, Margaret Fuller and Emily Dickinson.

**Mary Wollstonecraft** (27 April 1759 – 10 September 1797) was an English writer, philosopher and an ardent advocate of the rights of women. She married William Godwin. She was the mother of Mary Shelly, who wrote *Frankenstein*. When Mary Shelly was only eleven days old, Wollstonecraft died at the age of 38. Although God had granted her a very short life, she wrote some important books championing the causes of women. She wrote novels, treatises, a travel narrative, a history of the French Revolution and a children's book. After her death a *Memoir* was published in 1798. She is best known for her two books- *Thoughts on the Education of Women*(1787) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She highlighted the depressed condition of women, who had no education, no career,

no economic independence and no sense of a support network with women-achievers. What was shocking to her was that women were devoid of education and Rousseau had set a plan for their education only to the extent that middle and upper middle class women could prepare themselves for a compassionate marriage, a marriage in which women as wives would be trained to be pleasant companions for their husbands just as in the Middle East women were trained pasha (bashaw) or rulers. Wollstonecraft's text is addressed to women to make them aware of their rights and education. Wollstonecraft is of the opinion that education is integral to human development so it is more compelling in the cause of women than for men but the patriarchal structure of the society has made bondage to external reality. They are taught only superficial graces to please their future husbands. The denial of proper education to women is the root cause of a great many social and personal problems.

Wollstonecraft's crusade for women education is one of the major and early themes of feminist literary theory/criticism and a notion of social conditioning. England saw an explosion of women's education in 1870s when public schools and colleges were established in London, Oxford and Cambridge. The theory of Wollstonecraft bore fruits but only in a limited sense. Much more was needed to be done at a large and universal scale.

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