

# THE LITERATURE OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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## Beginnings

Although there have been isolated 'liberated' women throughout the centuries, the first organized movement for women in North America was founded in 1848. Women who were involved in the Abolition movement logically extended their arguments for human equality to include themselves.

The movement began as one of broadly-based feminism, but eventually focused on suffrage. A book worth reading on this era is *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, edited by Miriam Schneir (1972). Most leaders of the early Feminist Movement were Christians, some of them Quaker preachers, and based their arguments on Scripture. This book gives short glimpses into the lives and writings of some fascinating women and may lead one to read more of the authors represented.

When American women won the right to vote in 1920, the women's issue seemed dead and the movement set into decline. Kate Millet has called the period from 1930-1960 the counter-revolution. Then, in 1953, Simone de Beauvoir wrote a book called *The Second Sex*. In her wrestling with freedom both as an existentialist philosopher and as a woman, she encountered some of the problems which she went on to develop in the book. The work was acclaimed and read as a philosophic statement. Ms. de Beauvoir did not attempt to start any kind of movement, however, and only recently attached herself to the Women's Movement in France.

A major breakthrough for the feminist cause came with the publication in 1963 of Betty Frieden's sociology inquiry entitled *The Feminine Mystique*. This work was based on a survey Frieden took of her fellow graduates (of the class of '42) of Smith College, a prestigious women's university in Massachusetts.

During the 1940's women had been forced into the work world because of the war; but when the men came back, equality having been established, there had to be a rationale for women to return to their kitchens. So the culture produced an image of the happy housewife heroine—to be truly feminine meant to be bearing children and baking cookies. Women's magazines were inundated with stories about frustrated career women, discovering real happiness when they gave up their unnatural functions and married the boy next door.

Yet, in 1960 when *Redbook* magazine asked for a response to an article titled, "Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped", the editors were shocked to receive 24,000 replies. There was a disparity between the real and the societal ideal. Frieden discovered that the guilt she felt at wanting to do more than stay at home was shared. So she came to make the revolutionary statement: "I want something more than my children and my home".

Ms. Frieden's practical treatise set off a chain of women's books and groups, with Frieden herself heading the political National Organization of Woman. Women suddenly became a topic of vital concern.

Of the books that followed, two of the most influential were Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Both books are based on literature and offer a critique on the state of the sexes. Both of them offer some kind of revolution as the answer, with Greer being more specifically Marxist.

Ms. Greer, who lectured in English at Warwick University, uses bits of literature to make her points. Ms. Millet analyzed the works of four male authors, three of whom she attacks as men who set about to establish their own power through sexual politics. The fourth, Jean Genet, a homosexual, she uses as an example of the feminine/masculine roles as caricatured by a male homosexual society.

### **The Problem of Goals**

A fifth book which seems to be gaining influence in this realm is Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. Although the Feminist Movement, for the most part, bases itself on revolutionary theory, this author is more explicitly dialectical in her analysis than the previously mentioned authors. Ms. Firestone feels that politics began with the male/female distinction. By defining women as those people who have the burden of bearing children she proposes that the solution to sexual inequality will be test-tube babies.

When secular feminists, who at times offer brilliant critiques of our societal sex roles, reach the point of attempting to suggest solutions, they suddenly sound incredibly naive. Ms. Firestone goes the furthest toward discussing goals and so ends her book on a more patently absurd note. She recognizes that the thought of artificial reproduction is frightening to some people because:

. . . in the hands of our current scientists (few of whom are female or even feminist) any attempted use of technology to free anybody is suspect. But we are speculating about post-revolutionary systems, and for the purposes of our discussion we shall assume flexibility and good intentions in those working out the change.

In her plan for the future, Firestone sees, as a final step, communistic anarchy leading to achievement of Cosmic Consciousness.

### **Beauvoir's Analysis**

Simone de Beauvoir's analysis, *The Second Sex*, which has been the philosophical basis for the chain of secular feminist thought, is probably the most serious and intellectually honest treatment. To Ms. de Beauvoir, the problem is that man sees himself as Subject and woman as Other, or the Second Sex. When defined in this way, woman is cheated of her right to personhood. Beauvoir sees the problem as centering in the man-

woman relationship and the solution as lying in their working together toward being fully human. This is in contrast to feminists like Jill Johnson who, in her book, *Lesbian Nation*, advocates separatism and possible Amazon rule.

Ms. de Beauvoir denounces Christianity for encouraging women's subjugation. Yet whenever she begins to frame a solution she talks about Christian theory. In discussing the possibility of marriage (she has never married Sartre, although they have spent a lifetime together and he has apparently wanted them to marry), she quotes Kierkegaard as saying that marriage is something so mysterious that it can be explained only by divine action. In quoting Kierkegaard at length, she seems to say that if miracles were possible, there could be marriage, or, if marriage were possible, there would have to be a miraculous dimension.

Although Ms. de Beauvoir puts down attempts at individual salvation, she admires St. Theresa.

In a single process [St. Theresa] seeks to be united with God and lives out this union in her body; she is not the slave of her nerves and her hormones: one must admire rather, the intensity of a faith that penetrated to the most intimate regions of her flesh. The truth is, as she herself understood, that the value of a mystical experience is measured not according to the way in which it is subjectively felt, but according to its objective influence.

At this point, Ms. de Beauvoir sounds like St. James: "Faith without works is dead", and "whoever says he loves God and hates his sister is a liar"—which leads one to wonder what her position would be if the truth of the Gospel had been fleshed out before her, if Christians around her had granted women the dignity due a creature made in the image of God.

### **Mailer's Backlash**

At this point it might be good to look at one of the best "back-lash" books on the women's movement. In his book, *The Prisoner of Sex*, Norman Mailer sees fit to take on the women and their arguments. Mailer, who feels threatened by the attempt to deny or eradicate sexual differences, is forced to argue spiritually for that difference. It is the only way to combat the truth in the cries of Millet, *et al.* that "We have been dehumanized. We must radically change the existing order of things".

Mailer states,

It might be more natural to believe that God has established man and woman in some asymmetry of forces which was the life of the aesthetic . . . Yes, certainly that must be in the conception of the human project if Man [with Woman] loomed large in the works of the Lord.

So Mailer argues, if woman (or man) is self-sufficient, why did God make two sexes?

In reacting to statements by women like Ti-Grace Atkinson, who asserts that women are men who bear the burden of the reproductive process, Mailer says:

For [intercourse] either had a meaning which went to the root of existence or it did not; sex, finally, could not possess reasonable funds of meaning the way food does . . . Yet try to decide there is design in the universe, that humans embody a particular Intent, assume just once there is some kind of destiny intended—at the least! intended for us, and therefore human beings are not absurd, not totally absurd, assume some Idea . . . is in operation and then sex cannot comfortably prove absurd.

Mailer does not claim to be a Christian; his imagery and language is bawdy. And yet his thinking is on the razor's edge and has led him to use words often missing from secular vocabulary, words like "fornication" and "lust". In using this language he affirms, with the Christian, that everything is not in one category of "making love".

## Conclusion

The movement whose roots in the earlier Feminist Movement were radically Christian, was reborn under Marxist auspices and became unable on that basis to answer the questions it raises.

In Christianity there is a rationale for equality and difference between sexes. The materialists, on the other hand, are trying to eradicate physical differences in order to justify changes, because the physical, for them, is all there is.

Within the Christian faith we can fight for truth and freedom and yet love the oppressor. In the secular Liberation Movement the male becomes "The Enemy". And when he is defined as such it becomes impossible to sleep with him and so women become political lesbians, that is, lesbianism becomes a political imperative rather than a natural inclination. This is not to say all radical feminists are 'gay'. Many women are trying to work out the type of marriage described in George and Nena O'Neill's *Open Marriage*. But a good many of the leaders and political group members are moving toward "the lesbian nation" in a gesture of total contempt for the male system.

In Christ we can relate to our sisters in love without making love, without its being sexual. We have a basis, as part of God's family, for caring for each other.

In Christ we not only have a basis for negating cultural stereotypes of woman's role, but we have positive patterns of what woman should be and can be (e.g. Deborah, the woman of Proverbs 31, etc.). And we have the power to move toward what we would be.

The secular Feminist writers break down when it comes to goals, or a positive statement on what is to be achieved. They have no historical model, except for a fantasy construct of "Amazon Society", and are embarrassed by the Marxist historical record—the failure of the feminist cause in the Soviet Union and Cuba.

As Christians we have a history that at times denies the radicality set forth by Jesus *and* Paul ("in Christ there is neither male nor female" Gal. 3: 28). But where pagan philosophies have crept into Christianity we have fallen short of Christ's radical feminism.

It is time, now, when women and men are floundering with their sex roles, often reacting negatively against one another in their baseless search for identity, for followers of Christ to reaffirm what it means to be liberated men and women of God, in our way of thinking and in our daily interactions with one another.

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