

# Feminism: Various Approaches and Its Values

IVY SINGH\*

**F**eminism is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation at work, within the family and society, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation and uplift the life of women. It is unfortunate that people, particularly the majority of men feel threatened. "We don't mind things like the welfare of women, but feminism is a problem" is a comment made by many people.

It is true that feminism makes people uncomfortable because it is a movement which enters the sanctity of the home, questions our own belief, attitude, behaviour patterns, our religion and our values. Since feminism questions the existing dominant structures it runs into conflict. Feminism is against patriarchy expressed in domination, selfishness, aggression, violence and oppression. The various approaches challenge the status quo and propose a fundamental change in society in which both women and men live in equal status.

## What is Feminism?

Feminism has no specific abstract definition applicable to all women at all times, since it is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels consciousness, perceptions and actions. It is a complex movement with many layers. It can be articulated differently in different parts of the world, depending upon various backgrounds.

Earlier women struggled for their democratic rights, such as the right to education and employment, the right to vote, the right to own property etc. In other words, they fought for a legally equal position in the society. But today they are working for their emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression. Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan say "Present day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control their lives and bodies within and outside the home".<sup>1</sup> Feminism is not about what women should do and should not do. The Socialist and liberation tradition define "a transformation of the patriarchal socio-economic system, in which the male domination of

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\*Mrs. Ivy Singh, teaches Christian Theology at Serampore College, Serampore.

women is the foundation of all socio-economic hierarchies."<sup>2</sup> The National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) defines feminism in a broader sense: "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in the society, at work and within the family and conscious action to change the situation"<sup>3</sup> According to the above definitions, a feminist is any one who recognizes the existence of the gender discrimination, male domination, and patriarchy and who acts against it. Feminism does not limit its area only within women's issues like wife beating and rape, but sees the removal of all forms of inequality and strives for making a just social and economic, political and religious order. That is why, feminism is not only the problem of women, it is the problem of the whole humanity and of the nature.

### Is Feminism a Notion of the West?

Many thinkers trace back the history of feminism and say that the first voices were heard in the 17th century in France, USA and other western countries, and took a solid united global form from 1960.<sup>4</sup> Many criticise that it is a western thinking which need not be imposed on our theological education. May I give two comments for this criticism? Firstly, we like western pop music, western dresses, we follow the western development paradigm in India and most of the ideologies we follow are western. An idea can not be confined within the national or geographical boundaries. The second is, the term feminism may be foreign, but this process started in India in the 13th and 14th centuries as an organised stand against women's subordination.

In Tamil land, the equality enjoyed by the women in ancient period was changed by Aryans whose arrival can be traced back to 3rd century A.D. They were brought to the Tamil land by Pallavas who ruled the land from c 300 A.D. to 910 A.D. They donated lands to the Brahmins, following the Manu Dharma tradition.<sup>5</sup> The Pandya kings who ruled Tamil land were also following Manu and treating women as slaves. According to Manu dharma women do not have the property rights.<sup>6</sup> In order to emphasise the subordination of women, three-concepts were introduced. 1. *Paththini* (chaste woman) concept talks that a woman must be kept under the control of man. 2. *Sumankali* (married woman with husband alive) concept sees the widows as cursed ones. 3. *Kudumpa pen* (Family woman) concept limits the role of a woman within the kitchen. During this time, to strengthen these concepts *Silappadigaram*, a Tamil epic emerged. The story goes like this: Kovalan, a rich young man left his wife Kannaki and lived with a dancer Madhavi. During his absence

Kannaki lived as *paththini* and as a *sumankali*. When her husband returned he accepted her as a *kudumpa pen* and they planned to lead a new life and so she gave her anklet to him to sell, but he was killed by the king on the false charge of a goldsmith that he was a thief. Kannaki took revenge by burning Madurai and she was considered as *Paththini Deivam* (Goddess of Chastity). Followed by this writing there was a strong folk protest against these concepts.<sup>7</sup> This can be traced as the beginning of feminism. This folk story is Pazayanur Nili.<sup>8</sup> This story is a counter story in which the woman Nili takes revenge against her husband who killed her in the first birth. The story ends that 'thus Nili took revenge by striking terror in the hearts of all the wicked husbands.'

A folk song 'Oppari' (Dirige) pictures the lament of a widow,  
 "If I go to the river called Koya, with a jug of milk and a young  
 cock,  
 The Brahmins of Koya river will say, 'Here comes the despised  
 woman,  
 close the temple, put two hooks (to make it secure),  
 But if I start lamenting from the west of the temple,  
 The temple will crack and the hooks will break."<sup>9</sup>

This song explains how the feminism was strong in the Tamil land in the early centuries. Thus feminism is not a western ideology imposed upon us. In my opinion, it is not a borrowed ideology but a born ideology in our own context.

Today in our changing society we may find various issues and forms of oppression but I feel the causes of oppression remain the same. The issues we raise are local such as dowry, violence against women, rape, unequal wages, use of religion to oppress women, the negative portrayal of women in the media etc. Since some forms of oppression are universal our approach becomes universal. In India we never raise the western feminist issues like free sex and lesbianism. It shows that our feminism is contextual. It is important to note that the women poet saints of the Bhakti movement of the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. raised voice against social restrictions through composing poetry, singing, dancing, praying and preaching in public. This ideology has been well developed in Bengal during the time of William Carey and Ram Mohan Roy as a form of demand for the possibility of widow remarriage, female infanticide, a ban on polygamy, ban on sati, and the demands for the education and legal emancipation of women. Later one of the agitators of women's rights was Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), who attacked the Hindu religious orthodoxy and spoke for the liberation of women. Rama Mehta points out that the role of missionaries and a significant number of British women like Annie Besant and Margret Cousins added the spirit of

feminism in the Indian society. Indian women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Laxmi Menon, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and their contributions must be recognised.

### **Various Approaches**

The various women's movements in the world raised their voices that women and men should be treated equally. Within these voices we observe several distinct approaches. Though the approaches vary, all believe the need for justice and equality for women. The main approaches are:

#### *1. The Conservative Feminism*

This approach admits that some women do suffer hardships, but it does not see this suffering as a part of the social oppression of women. Conservative views come in different forms but they all have certain fundamentals in common. All claim that women and men should fulfil different functions, and the differences should be enforced by law. Conservative feminism, thus presupposes that women and men are inherently unequal in abilities. So conservatives argue that social differentiation between the sexes is not unjust, since justice not only allows but requires us to treat unequals unequally.<sup>10</sup>

#### *2. Liberal Feminism*

Mary Wollstonecraft in her book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' criticizes the conservative view, by explaining the basic idea of liberal feminism, "that women are first and foremost human beings and not sexual beings. Women are rational creatures, they are capable of governing themselves by reason. Hence if women are to be denied natural rights, it must be proved that they have no rational capacity."<sup>11</sup>

The main thrust of liberal feminism is that an individual woman should be able to determine her social role with as great freedom as does a man. Rosemary Ruether in *Sexism and Godtalk* says that feminism has sought to dismantle the historic structure of patriarchal law that denied women's civil rights. The major emphasis is that equality of women before the law, in educational and professional opportunities, change in marriage laws, property rights, inequitable divorce, equal pay for equal work, protection from rape, wife battering in the home and liberation from all dehumanising forces. In short, it aims at bringing equality between women and men in the framework of the existing social systems—do not question the underlying basis of women's subordination.

Liberal feminism has been criticised for not providing more insights into the roots of women's inferior status. They were content with the existing social order but advocated improvement of social customs. They hoped that reforms will transform society and so felt that radical restructuring is not necessary. In other words, the liberal do not believe that it is necessary to change the whole existing structure in order to achieve women's liberation.

### *3. Classical Marxist Feminism*

Marxists recognize that women suffer special forms of oppression, because they are the victims of our economic system. They become the victims of the various manifestations of poverty, the poor environment, poor clothing, poor housing or no housing, poor health, poor education. The hardships of poverty hit them more severely, less food, less health care and other basic necessities. So it is clear that women's oppression is rooted in capitalism. Marxists believe that the oppression of women is the result of their traditional position in the family in which they are excluded from participating in the public production, but restricted in the private domestic work at home. Marxists do argue that the advent of capitalism intensified the degradation of women and that the continuation of capitalism and male domination reinforce each other.

Sexism benefits the capitalism, by providing a supply of cheap labour for industry. We find women in low paid, low status or even no paid work. Modern development policies have undermined the traditional occupation of women and marginalized the economic role of women. The modern technology used in the industries has reduced the number of women workers who even if they work, end up in the informal sector and in the low paid jobs.

Classical Marxist feminism is different from liberal feminism. Liberal feminism views that freedom is the absence of discrimination against women, whereas classical Marxist feminism holds that freedom is not just the absence of discrimination against women but rather as freedom from the coercion of economic necessity. Similarly equality demands not mere equality of opportunity to compete against other individuals but as approximate equality in the satisfaction of material needs. Classical Marxists believe that the liberation of the woman requires a more radical change in the family where within the family the husband is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat.

### *4. Radical Feminism*

It is a recent attempt in the late 1960s, formulated by T. Grace Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone.<sup>12</sup> It denies the liberal claim that

the lack of political or civil rights causes women's oppression. It also rejects the classical Marxist idea that women are oppressed because they live in a class society. Radical feminists claim that the root of women's oppression is biological. They believe that the physical subordination of women by men is the primary form of oppression, others are secondary. So radical feminism says that our liberation requires a biological revolution. They raise the demand for the destruction of patriarchy. There is a shift in emphasis from struggle for role and legal reforms to the destruction of patriarchy. The chief institution of patriarchy is the family and the family promotes patriarchy in the society. It believes, thus that the whole system must be abolished (even its biological aspects. For them, equality means not just equality under the law nor even equality in material needs, rather it means that women, like men should not have to bear children. Freedom for women means that women must be free to have close relationship with children without having to give birth to them. Radical feminism contains many interesting claims such as pregnancy and child birth are painful and unpleasant experiences. They believe that the technology should be used to eliminate all kinds of pain particularly from the fundamental inequality of the bearing and raising of the children. This must be the basic achievement because they believe that the heart of women's oppression is their childbearing and childrearing roles.

### *5. Socialist Feminism*

The task of social feminism is to avoid the weaknesses of each other approaches and to incorporate the insights. Socialist feminists reject the idea that liberation for women requires the abolition of child birth. They seek to analyse the subordination of women as linked with other forms of oppression, and attempt to unite the fights for socialism with that for women's liberation. The family and the economy are not looked upon as separate institutions but as interacting systems. In this line, one may observe that socialist feminism is an extension of classical Marxism using similar notions like human nature, of freedom and equality, and of the role of the state. Under the socialist conditions, Marxist feminism developed by Engles believes that the restoration of women to autonomy is possible. Modern industrialization was in fact beginning this liberation of women by forcing working class women into wage labour. Under socialism the means of production would be owned and managed by the workers themselves. Then women, along with men, as workers will have a equal share in the fruits of their labour. Then women as independent wage earners will be able to relate to men as equal partners, both on the job and within marriage. Thus the vision of

the socialist feminist is totalistic, requiring transformation of the entire fabric of social relationships.<sup>13</sup>

### *-Need for Contextual Feminist Theory*

The above approaches demand us to formulate an inclusive feminist theory, relevant to our own context. This would enable us to see the immediate needs in terms of long range goals. It will give us a framework for evaluating various strategies and for seeing the types of changes that they are likely to produce. When we formulate a contextual theory it must aid to the liberation of women, bringing insights from various female experiences. Charlotte Bunch divides theory into four inter-related parts:<sup>14</sup> description, analysis, vision and strategy. Describing what exists (reality of women), analysing why they exist (causes of oppression), visioning what should exist (establishing principles and goals) and making strategies how to change are the important factors used in the theory. Since the realities and the causes differ from one context to another, our theory must be contextual.

### *Do we need Feminism?*

Many say that now women have democratic rights, education and employment. Women are in good positions. What then is the problem? And do we still need feminism? It is partially true, but the number is less compared with men. Very few are in decision making and executive or managerial positions. Most women are in the informal sector, family helpers, earning very little. In India, we still find that the women are behind men in every sphere. So the presence of few women in important public positions in no way proves that the overall status of women in our country has improved.

The model of development we follow in our country is based on the capitalist mode and historically capitalist development has reinforced and intensified gender specific roles as well as the exploitation of women. Capitalism always argues that women are less productive than men, and must be paid less than men. Our development paradigms will not help fully for the liberation of women.

The general criticism of feminism is that it destroys peace at home. Feminists claim that they do disturb homes but not peaceful homes, because the peacefulness of many homes is a facade, behind which the emotions and feelings of women are suppressed. As long as women do not object to such injustice, there is peace. As long as women ask their husbands to share their work, there is peace. But when she starts asking the husband to do this work then the problem starts. In the family context, peace is oppression of

women. Feminism, thus does not destroy peace but gives a new meaning for peace.

### *Feminism and Feminist Theology*

The patriarchal theologies interpret the Bible literally and emphasise the subordination of women made by God at the time of creation because she was created second and out of Adam. Similarly the women too use the Bible to protect their status. By 1830s and 1840s many women in America felt the need for different understanding of the Bible. Sarah Grimke, in 1839 called for new feminist scholarship, charging that "the masculine bias of Biblical interpretation was part of a deliberate plot against women."<sup>15</sup>

The first woman to study Theology in Oberlin College, Antonette Brown (1853) made a study on Paul's letters through a feminist perspective.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of 19th century leading feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton felt the need to counteract the oppressive power of the Biblical interpretation.<sup>17</sup> She gathered a group of twenty women into the women's Revising Committee to do a systematic study of patriarchy in the Bible. As a result many reflected on this theme and gave a theological meaning for feminism. This shows that feminism influences more for the making of feminist theology. The aim of feminist theology is also to bring equality for women. Thus feminism and feminist theology are interrelated and they contribute to each other.

### *Is Feminism Biblical?*

Feminism takes the creation narrative seriously and highlights the neglected elements which portray women as God's co-workers and agents of life. It takes the prophetic principles, includes women in this liberating tradition and claims that women are among the oppressed whom God comes to vindicate and liberate. It also emphasises the prophetic messianic tradition and interprets the ministry of Jesus, not as a kingly Messiah but as a suffering servant, as the one who comes to restore the humanity. The central message of Jesus (Lk. 4:16-19) is an ideological reformation and it includes the oppressed, the women. Feminism takes the Biblical tradition seriously and longs for a transformation of the society that will bring new modes of relationship.

### **The Values of Feminism**

Feminists should introspect, explore and trust their own thoughts, emotions and experiences, recognise realistically their positive and



negative characteristics and set their approach, goal and work towards them.<sup>18</sup> The value of feminism is for women to be personally strong, not for dominating others, but to impart their love, truth and faith in themselves and other women. This personal power enables a woman to be active, assertive and skillful, and not allow oneself to be a passive victim. Feminism encourages the women for using their creativity which means being adaptable to changes and having increased diversity in one's thinking. For this, feminism seeks that women need to face and learn to use anger, conflict, competition and success in new ways. Feminism thus values the right of women to live as free and equal human beings. Equality in all areas of life: women's constitutional rights as citizens, work, access to wealth, responsibilities within marriage including childbearing and the financial maintenance of the home. Feminism promotes egalitarian non-hierarchical relationship which are based on mutual respect, understanding, and thus foster mutual growth.

Feminism takes sexual oppression as the basis of all other oppression and so it treats sexual freedom and freedom of all women inseparable. In other words, feminism integrates sexual freedom of being a human being. On this basis motherhood should be voluntary for all women. This means that the choice to have a child should be upto the women and only the women. The condition of her production and reproduction should not be distorted or held back because of her sex, caste or class.

Feminism talks about the three stages for bringing social change.<sup>19</sup> The first stage is having visions of a changed society in which the cultural constructs can be changed, eliminated; vision of a society free from power domination. The second stage is feeling a need of social change and feeling obligated to fight for one's rights. The third stage is social action itself. It is not accepting a second class citizenship, hierarchies, male values, male definition of women, violence towards women, but changing the system and its values.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I find feminism to be not only necessary for our society, but also necessary for those who participate in the process of defining, articulating, shaping and living it. Though there are differences in the approaches still it has the potential to provide us the direction towards liberation which other isms have failed to do. Feminism suggests a profound change in society at every level of life.

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