

FEMINIST THOUGHT IN THE SELECT WORKS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND HELEN CIXOUS

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ABSTRACT

Feminism stands for the belief that men and women should have the equal/same rights and opportunities and the struggle to achieve this aim. It is a cultural, intellectual and political movement that acknowledges the fact of oppression of women and seeks ways to liberate them. The themes of this movement, which implicitly as well as explicitly question the positioning of women as inferior and weak, passive and subordinate in comparison to men. It challenges the traditional concept of woman as the weaker sex and the credence that her place is in the kitchen or within the four walls of house. It pretends the equality of the sexes and seeks to achieve for women a role in society which such equality sanctions. Feminism exposes the inhuman injustice done to women and the hypocrisy underlying the abominable patriarchal social order. It vehemently protests against the institutions that crushed women. It manifests the deprivation and exploitation women suffered not only in English societies but in all societies. It aimed at liberating women from various manifestations of gender based discrimination and exploitation. Feminism holds an important place in modern literature. It as a movement became popular in 1960s. Then it slowly and gradually grew into a worldwide cultural movement to secure the complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights-moral, religious, social, political, educational, economic, legal etc. In the context of the aforementioned points, this paper attempts to study Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Helen Cixous's "The Laugh of Medusa."

Keywords: *Feminism, oppression, equality, exploitation, discrimination and modern literature.*

I. FEMINIST WRITING

Feminist writing is one of the recent trends in modern literary criticism. The Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s is the main motivating force behind this movement. Juliet Mitchell's essay "Woman: the Longest Revolution" (1966), Mary Ellamann's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Bronte to Lessing* (1970), Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981) are the pioneering works in the direction of the evolution of feminist criticism. Feminist criticism is a powerful organ for the expression of feminine sensibility and aspirations in innovative linguistic and stylistic patterns. It is chiefly concerned with the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts of

women writers. Women have been writing about their experiences in a male dominated world since long but it gained currency in the 1960s. The feminist writing of the 1960s was mainly concerned with: it examined the representation of women in literature and probed the mode and manner of the construction of those descriptions. It found it imperative to interrogate the circumstances and authority and purpose of the descriptions. It positioned itself to resist the ideology that existing images of women propagated in society. It discovered the importance of working through books, literature and other mass media circulation of images of women as the most way of affecting everyday conduct and attitudes. The feminist writing and thinking of the 1970s is the investigation and elaboration of patriarchal systems. Patriarchy indicates the structures through which male domination over women is achieved. Feminist writing seeks to unveil the mindset in men and women that perpetuates gender inequality. Specific heed is paid to male writers constructing typical and influential images of women. Feminist criticism of the period is certainly abrasive, polemical and combative. Add to this fact that in the 1980s, feminist criticism began to be influenced by the development of other branches of literary theory. It also veered away from the critique of a male version of the world. It acknowledged that the history of civilization/mankind has been formulated as the history of men, and women have been rendered invisible in that narrative. Feminism then solicits to recuperate women from the periphery of history and make women's experience visible. In other words, it explores the nature of women's experiences and seeks to reestablish the lost/suppressed narratives of women's experience.

II. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) generally considered the first feminist was an eighteenth century English novelist, political thinker, moral philosopher, and women's rights advocate. She is considered as one of the founding members of feminist school of thought. She opposed limitations on women's freedom for self-expression and self-development. She wrote against the demeaning indignity of systematic prohibition of women from the rights and accountabilities of citizenship. Wollstonecraft is best remembered for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), an influential text in the field of feminist philosophy/criticism. In this book, she asserts that women are not essentially inferior/secondary to men, but strike one as only because they lack education. It emphasizes the role of women's education in removing their inferiority and insecurity. The book illustrates the viewpoint that education alone can broaden woman's consciousness of the world and protect her place in the society. It opposes/questions androcentric/male-supremacist ideas and pleads for women's access to employment opportunities and political issues. In other words, Wollstonecraft in this tour de force feminist text, appeals for egalitarian social philosophy/socialist world as the basis for the creation and preservation of equal rights and opportunities for women. Moreover, the book advocates equality of social, political, legal, moral and cultural rights between men and women. One of the fundamental features of the book is that it vehemently repudiates Rousseau's views on women's rationality. According to Rousseau, women were weak and not capable of reasoning effectively. Thus, they don't deserve education but a proper place in husband's home. Wollstonecraft rejected this hypothesis and believed women could become rational creatures if they are given education, freedom and equal opportunities in legal, political and other institutions. In this monumental feminist text, she appealed for egalitarian social philosophy/socialist world as the basis for the creation and preservation

of equal rights and opportunities for women Mary Wollstonecraft wrote movingly about the unequal access to education and the lack of alternatives available to women who sought options other than marriage and motherhood. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is considered a pioneering work of eighteenth century English literature, the manifesto of feminism and one of the first books expressing exclusively feminist ideas. It is the first comprehensive text which illustrated the statement that women need to be educated and thoroughly stressed to end the gender differences.

III. SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *THE SECOND SEX*

Simone de Beauvoir, novelist, essayist and biographer, is one of the outstanding voices in the theory of feminist criticism. She was an eminent twentieth century French existentialist philosopher, anti-colonist and political activist. In 1949, she produced one of the pivotal texts of modern literature called *The Second Sex*. It is a revolutionary book that influenced the twentieth century thinking profoundly. It is an endeavor to challenge the human history from a feminist perspective. Here, Beauvoir examines how female humans came to occupy a subordinate/secondary position in the society. She turns to the disciplines of biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. These disciplines demonstrate indisputable primary differences between men and women but offer no justification for women's inferiority. She afterwards goes to history to unravel the emergence of male superiority in society from nomadic-hunter gatherers through French Revolution and contemporary period. She further examines various mythical representations of women and indicates how these myths have established human consciousness, often to the disservice of women. The basic premise of this monumental text is that men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them at all levels as the 'other.' In the masculine or male dominated society men order and women carry them out, men produce situations and women live them, the only hope for a woman is another woman. Their experiences being identical, women alone can comprehend each other. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "The situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other." Man holds the role of the self, or subject, a woman is the object, the other. She is unimportant/inessential deficient/imperfect, mutilated whereas man is important, complete, perfect and absolute. He (man) extends out into the world to impose his volition on it, whereas woman is doomed to immanence or inwardness. This situation is beautifully depicted by Beauvoir in these words: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the

incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” Beauvoir attempts to prove that women are not born ‘feminine’ but are shaped by thousands of external processes. At every stage of their life, they are conditioned into accepting passivity, subordination, dependence and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of her subjectivity and individuality flattening her into an object. Denying the possibility of independent work, women have to accept a dissatisfying life of domestic work, bearing and rearing children and so on. She rebels against bourgeois mentality that girls are meant to marry and bear children. Beauvoir investigates the situations/roles that subordinates her role. In this book Beauvoir denounced patriarchal culture and examines the marginal position of women in society and the arts. In this text, she depicts how the women are actually the ‘other’ and how she is on the margin in the patriarchal society. The book examines the woman’s overall impression created in the society by men and in examining it exhibits the myth of male superiority. It is primarily concerned with the physical repression/subjugation of women. Furthermore, Beauvoir mentions it is only in work that women can achieve autonomy and a form of liberation. *The Second Sex* is regarded as one of the first books in which the suppressed female voice is articulated and the grandeur of woman is stated.

IV. HELEN CIXOUS’S “THE LAUGH OF THE MEDUSA”

Helene Cixous is a contemporary French poet, novelist, dramatist, philosopher and critical theorist. With the publication of “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Cixous achieved name and fame worldwide. The essay was originally written in French as “Le Rire de la Meduse” but was later translated into English by Keith and Paula Cohen in 1976. The essay is a literary manifesto in feminist criticism. What distinguishes this text from other feminist texts is it urges women to write themselves about their bodies, sexuality and all opinions they have about themselves and others. In other words, Cixous reminds womenfolk that it is men who have written about history, sciences, nature, medicines and above all regarding women. As she articulates this fact in these words: “It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition.” Cixous provides us the example of Sigmund Freud who according to Cixous is one of the many men responsible for categorizing women as neurotic/overwrought, weak and lacking. She asks women to come forward and take the challenge of writing themselves. She further mentions the writings of men have created the image of women as ‘other.’ In order to deconstruct or subvert the phallogocentric (male) ideology/writing she vehemently asks women to take the profession of writing and put forth their lives, stories, views and so on. She writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

“The Laugh of Medusa” is all about the need for women to express/articulate their narratives themselves for only a woman can describe the true nature of femininity. Cixous states: “there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity.” This situation of inviting women to put forth their opinions in writing is what Cixous calls “écriture feminine.” The term “écriture feminine” is a French term coined by Helene Cixous which in English refers to “women’s writing” or “feminine writing.” The art of writing, Cixous believes, can liberate women’s minds, bodies and would grant them desirable position and power in the society. It would liberate womenfolk from political, cultural and social oppression for their voices have been muted and silenced for centuries. She asserts once women start to express their feelings, opinion and sentiments in writings their voices will reach in every nook and corner of the world. She says: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.”

In this essay, Cixous uses the name of Medusa in a metaphorical sense. Medusa is a Greek mythological character generally known for being a half beast (snake like hair) and half human. She was a gorgon for she used to turn anyone into a stone that looks at her. She represents all those creatures who were uncultured and without any language. Due to Medusa’s bestial nature she was killed by Perseus while chopping her head. Cixous takes Medusa’s murder by a man (Perseus) one of the historical facts when women’s voice was silenced. Medusa’s death, according to Cixous, is the first attempt when women lost her identity. Thereafter, Cixous asserts women never find their identity/self either in the society or within themselves. She blames men for the loss of women’s self for they are the ones who muted their (women) voice once and for all. She comments:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away - that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak - even just open her mouth - in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.

In Greek times women were considered ignorant, uneducated, philistine, uncultured, ill-tempered and so on. Medusa represented them all. Cixous deconstructs this myth and presents Medusa as a beautiful and laughing creature. She upholds this fact in these lines: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.” In other words, Cixous advocates that women are second to none. She urges women to keep faith in their bodies, minds, abilities and their individual existence. She asks them to revolt against the phallogocentric ideology (male oriented theories) and write themselves what they are experiencing. In this essay, on the one hand, she brings forth the marginal position of women while on the other hand she pleads for feminine writing. “The Laugh of Medusa” is all about that feminine writing is the only force which can liberate the women from male dominate world. It would infuse the sense of individuality among women. In the conclusion, one would like to recall the words of Cixous because they aptly describe this theme: “Write! Writing is for you, you are for you, your body is yours, take it.”

V. CONCLUSION

One of the foundational and rudimental essences of feminism is to manifest that a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the 'other'; she is not an extension to man. She is an individualistic being, capable of, through trial and defect, finding her own way to emancipation. The fundamental objective of feminism is to resist/oppose woman to be treated as a sex object and to provide her equality with man. She must be treated as a human being and not an 'other' or object for male gratification. These issues are aptly dealt in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Helen Cixous's "The Laugh of Medusa."

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