

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Feminism: Understanding Human as a Construct**

Dr. Vinod Kumar, Assistant Professor, Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, Patiala.

Feminism diagnosed women's unequal place in society and culture. Women's active political movement in 1960s against their exploitation in any sphere of life on the basis of sex led to the development of theory of feminism. It can be seen throughout the history that this development has had various stages all over the world. Numerous thinkers and activists worked for equal space for women in society. Notable works include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Fredrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family* (1884), Olive Shreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), Juliet Michell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), and Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985).

Historically speaking, feminism is divided into three states or waves. The first wave of feminism denotes the struggle for the right of property and vote; the second denotes the struggle for socio-cultural equality in 1960s; and the third wave emerged in 1990s, which embraced the individualism and diversity among women, and redefined feminism in the post-modern culture.

Actually, it is not an easy task to define feminism nor a single definition can do it. It is a kind of consciousness that actively counters the exploitation in the name of sex. Rajesh Sharma writes, "[It] denotes, among other things, a certain kind of critical gender sensibility to the patriarchal and phallogocentric orders" (41). He again states, "Feminism is a sensibility, both an intellectual analysis of women's unequal place in society and culture and a multifaceted, active resistance to their oppression." Feminism is a political consciousness to understand the relationship between a male and female through various mediators.

Feminism is a discourse because it reconstructs what the patriarch destructs and redefines everything under discussion. It is a new way of understanding and living life. Feminism essentially develops in counter reaction to patriarchy, but gradually thinkers take insights from various philosophies of the world to develop it fully, which is why there is no single feminism rather a list of feminisms is there according to the various philosophies of the world e.g. Marxist Feminism; Liberal Feminism; Radical Feminism; Existentialist Feminism etc.

Marxism does not directly focus on the construction of gender, rather one has to trace the elements of Marxist feminism from various Marxist writings. Marxism is a very sharp attack on the western capitalist society. Guerin, Wilfred state that, "Marxist feminists do not separate 'personal identity' from class identity..." (234). It examines the position of a woman as: how much control does she have on production? What is her contribution in it? What are her materialistic conditions? Marxist Feminism is the study of the materialistic, socio-cultural, political, and economic effects. The

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ideology does not express the pure individual rather it expresses the subconscious of the whole social class and affirms the exploitation or the patriarchy. A famous Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton states, “[t]he function of ideology is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society” (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 5).

Liberal Feminism is a restrained feminism which seeks gender equality through legal and political reforms within a framework of liberal democracy. It focuses on the feminism from the perspective of morals and human rights. Liberal feminists demand co-operation from both the sides for a better society. As a product of first-wave feminism, it seeks recognition of women in society as equal citizens focusing particularly on right for education. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is an example of liberal feminism.

Radical Feminism identifies the distinction, as in, it states that the body and the gender are ways of exploitation. It is an issue of the gender where everything is defined and decided by the male. Radicals state that the female is different from the male and should not blindly follow the male. They challenge the whole structure of power revolutionarily. They state what is right or wrong must be redefined. They wanted women to lead in every sphere of life. Thus, their feminism stands exactly in opposite direction of patriarchy.

The philosophy of existentialism took shape with the writings of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He discusses the three modes of being in his book *Being and Nothingness*: being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-for-others. He adds that existence precedes essence means “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 28). The renowned French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, was a very close friend to Sartre. She discusses the being of a female in society as a being-for-others. Thus, the existentialist feminists invite women to define themselves by establishing their existence. These are the ways of existence which decide one’s life and course of life.

The brief discussion on the various types of feminisms and the contribution of various thinkers, writers, and activists show that how all this does perpetuated the idea of uplifting the life of women and it came to be known as feminism.

In the time to time examinations and discussions, “gender” emerges as an important aspect in various feminist studies. It comes to be known as center around which all the politics is being played. In the mother text of feminism *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir dissects society’s messed up treatment of women and takes a deep dive into the concept of womanhood. She argues that throughout history, women have been treated like second-class humans, always stuck in the shadow of men. She explains that society has created this idea that women are defined solely by their relationship to men and women are not seen as individuals in their own right, but just as extensions or objects of men. Beauvoir goes deep into the social, cultural, and historical factors that have kept women in this subordinate position, calling out religion, politics, and even literature for perpetuating

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these oppressive ideas. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously writes that “one is not born but rather becomes a woman” (267), meaning, what a woman is, is a construct.

Since gender is a socio-cultural construct, there are numerous possible genders in society. The gender studies after 1990s gave new dimensions to feminism and gender studies as a whole. Performance comes into the centre of the construction of a gender among various other factors. It revolves around the performance and existence of an individual living under various socio-cultural conditions. Thus, the women’s studies led first to feminism, then to gender studies, and queer studies. It throws light on the construction of male and female in society as well as other gender-based identities. It also leads to the examination of the role of various factors in the human essence, including gender, caste, race, region, religion, economy, and historical and materialistic conditions.

Gender studies emerges as an interdisciplinary field focusing on gender identity and gender-based representations. Focusing on women, feminism, and gender politics, it emerges as a major field of study in the post-feminism times. It involves a number of fields and factors to study the construction of gender. Primarily, it states that there are not only two genders but numerous genders in our society based on the performance of an individual. Then, there is no fixed gender identity, rather it is fluid and can change time to time. The beginning of gender studies starts with identification of various gender based identities e.g. males, females, lesbians, gays, and then shifts to the queers. In an interview, Judith Butler, an American queer theorist states: “I am just sex neutral”.

In her book titled *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler gives significant insights about the nature of gender. She raises a number of questions in the traditional feminist understanding. She examines the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. She challenges the idea of a male and a female and states them as irrelevant. She argues that the traditional feminism divides humanity into two clear segments of male and female, while feminism must instead focus on providing the opportunities to an individual for its independent identity.

Butler challenges traditional notions by arguing that gender is not some fixed, inherent trait that people are born with, that it is instead all a big performance, a show that people put on day in and day out. She questions the power structures that keep these gender roles in place, explaining how these gender performances are constantly being enforced and policed by society, trapped in this never-ending cycle of expectations and conformity, creating notions of normal and deviant.

Butler argues that gender is not only a social construct it is also performativity and as a result of it, it is far from any kind of essence. All the things which seem natural, such as sex, gender, sexuality, and heterosexual desires are the result of the repetitive acts done under a particular time, culture, freedom and constraints. She adds that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expression of gender;. . . identity is performatively constituted by the very “expression” that are said to be its results” (34). However, Butler expresses that no one has to play by those rules anymore as she strongly suggests subverting those norms, disrupting the status quo, and embracing the fluidity of gender. She says that we can challenge those binary categories and embrace a more expansive

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understanding of gender. Thus, she theorizes gender, sex, and sexuality under the performativity.

The concept of “queer” got an institutional nod after the conference on queer theory at the University of California in 1990. It gives stress on the deconstruction of the pairs, such as lesbianism/gayism, homosexuality/heterosexuality etc. All the theories of queer theory are drawn from the insights of Michel Foucault registered in his book *History of Sexuality*. The British queer theorists, Dollimore and Alan Sinfield believe that power can be contested. This theory challenges to the traditional construction of sexuality. They believe that one can establish freedom and identity through untraditional sexuality. Sinfield argues that sexuality is an unstable construction. It means it is changeable and changing. In a similar way, Butler argues that lesbianism is also not permanent identity. Identity can be contested and changed. She adds that there is no permanent or real identity; it is a “. . . kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Barry 145).

Initially, the concept of the queer was used to denote the homosexual identities. However, it has become an umbrella term today. It includes each and every marginalized sexual identity. It is against fixed sexuality. Its focus is the odd relationships among the sex, gender and desire. It also includes the subjects like cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and gender correctively. It is an identity which is always under construction and this construction is impossible. It is not identity rather a critique on identity. David Halperin states that “[t]here is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers, it is an identity without an essence” (1).

The struggle starts for the betterment of women’s position in society, which gradually develops into a proper system called feminism. Then, the insights about the life of women lead to the examination of the construction of gender. Thus, a human being becomes the victim of gender which is a construct and the result of the performativity according to the studies. It is notable that critical understanding of gender is not only required for female but for the male also, rather correctly saying for human being also, as not only women but each and every human being has to experience these conditions and constructions. Ultimately, this understanding leads to the critical examination of human essence.

In the discussion about human essence, materialists recognize the priority of matter over mind. What we variously call mind, spirit, thought, and consciousness, is an activity of matter. Motion brings matter into existence. The human body moves with the energy called motion. Human essence is not a fixed attribute of an individual. It is fluid and changeable. The construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction as of the human being is always in progress. The present living and materialistic conditions play a major role in the construction of a human being.

Concerned with the construction of a human, German philosopher Martin Heidegger introduced the concept of thrownness. He states that human beings are thrown into the pre-defined world. No person is free to choose his place of birth, family, environment, society, culture, and particular historical time. Awareness and acknowledgment of the arbitrariness of *Existence* is characterized as a state of “thrown-ness” in the present with all its attendant pains, sufferings, frustrations, and demands that one does not choose, the prevailing environment. One’s existence

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becomes his/her manifestation of thrownness.

Jean-Paul Sartre, father of Existentialism, defines three modes of being in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943): being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-for-others. He argues that one's being is decided by various factors. In his lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 1946, he states that “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards” (2). He adds “existence precedes essence” (2). Ultimately it is one's duty to register one's existence according to self.

Simone de Beauvoir also does not buy into this idea that there is some fixed, predetermined essence that defines what it means to be a man or a woman. She calls out society for constructing these gender roles and expectations that limit people's individuality. She says that gender is a social construction, a made-up game with roles and expectations placed on everyone by society based on gender which are ultimately oppressive. While *The Second Sex* is indeed a wake-up call for everyone to recognize the importance of equality and to challenge the systems that keep women down, it is also a wake-up call to rethink the idea of gender.

Beauvoir's famous statement that one is not born a woman rather she becomes, gives us insights for the human essence itself that any kind of human essence is a construction. This essence gets constructed due to various factors. Similarly, Judith Butler argues that gender is performative and it also leads to the direction that human essence may also be performative.

Marxism and Historical Materialism examines the relationship between the base and superstructure, Matter and Consciousness. It is a dialectical relationship and construction is always in progress. The base consists of materialistic relations of production and the superstructure is constructed accordingly, in which one can count a number of human aspects including, ideology, culture, religion, politics, arts, etc. The superstructure affects the construction of the base also. Thus, human essence is the construction of this dialectical relationship between the two and it is always in progress according to this Marxist model. As a result of it, essence is fluid and always under construction where a number of factors play their role.

Discussing human history and the construction of a human being, Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, divides the whole society into two major categories: Civil and Political. He argues that the political society dominates a human being directly through law, politics, and administration to live life accordingly. On the other side, the civil society trains a human being how to live with the consent of the subject. The civil society includes the family, schools, society, culture, religion etc. Thus, he argues that the dominating system plays a major role to construct the life of a human being accordingly. Louis Althusser adds that the dominating system has ideological state apparatuses to control the lives of subjects. In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” he argues that interpolation creates one's identity. Hailing recruits subjects among individuals. Talking about the ideology, he states that it “signifies the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world”(as qtd. in Eagleton *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 16).

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It can be concluded that concepts like feminism and gender are interconnected with the concept of human essence. The gender and the human essence as a whole are fluid and their construction is a continuous process under various determinants. The need is to examine and map the position of a person under these various prevailing conditions. Humans need to identify their potential to play a constructive role in the world. Gender is not set in stone, but a performance people can challenge and redefine. It is strongly tied to the question of human essence and makes room for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what it means to be human.

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