

# FEMINISM

## AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

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### FOREWORD

#### Manliness and Feminity

For each strong *woman* tired of feigning weakness,

there is a weak *man* tired of seeming strong.

For each *woman* tired of having to act silly,

there is a *man* weighed down by having to feign he knows everything.

For each *woman* tired of being classified as an “emotional female”,

there is a *man* whose right to weep and to be delicate has been denied.

For each *woman* catalogued as not being feminine when she competes,

there is a *man* obliged to compete so that no doubt arises about his masculinity.

For each *woman* tired of being a sexual object,

there is a *man* worried about his sexual power.

For each *woman* who feels herself tied by her sons,

there is a *man* who has been denied, the pleasure of fatherhood.

For each *woman* who hasn't had access to a job or a satisfactory salary,

there is a *man* who has to assume the economic responsibility of another human being.

For each *woman* who doesn't understand the mechanism of a car,

there is a *man* who hasn't learnt the secrets of the art of cooking.

For each *woman* who takes a step towards her own liberation,

there is a *man* who rediscovers the way towards freedom.

[Anonymous]

Few have dared to ask: What does it mean to be a woman? It is the society's understanding of the nature of woman on which her status and importance depend. For this

understanding it is necessary to know the ideologies, movements through which women have sought their identity and actualization of their potentials. This paper on “Feminism: An Existential Perspective” is an attempt in this direction.

Feminism basically is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in the society. These relations of power, structure all areas of life—family, education and welfare, worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what; and for whom, what we are and what we might become? Like all social movements, contemporary feminism too has its roots in a political movement.

Both as a way of thought as well as a movement, feminism is an integral part of modernity. At the core of contemporary feminist movement there is a contradiction. For modern philosophy, from Descartes onwards, the real human is the male. In women’s cause, and in women’s studies, there is double bind at the core of it. Feminism is the daughter of modernity and is required to obey all the anti-women, often inconsistent, messages of modernity—its father. Hence, feminism is part and parcel of modern civilization—an integral aspect of modernity.

Feminist theorists like Butler, Frazer and MacKinnon, view feminism and postmodernism as conceptual and political allies. But certain versions of postmodernism not only are incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women. The undermining occurs because postmodernism is committed to three aspects: the death of self, understood as the death of the autonomous self-reflective subject, capable of acting on principles; secondly, the death of history, understood as the severance of the epistemic interest in history of struggling groups on constructing their past narratives and thirdly, the death of metaphysics, understood as the impossibility of criticizing or legitimizing institutions, practices and traditions.

“Feminism: An Existential Perspective” is an attempt to understand the layers of feminism. The more we become aware of the importance of the feminine in the society, the more we become aware of our human identity. The path of feminism has not been smooth, but rough and stormy. The journey has revealed that feminism influences every sphere of human existence. This detailed study is conducive in understanding the feminist process in the world in a deeper way, with an emphasis on Simone de Beauvoir’s existential feminism and a special reference to Indian feminism, which is generally identified as women’s movement.

In the following pages of “Feminism: An Existential Perspective”, **Chapter One** deals with the meaning and background of the term ‘Feminism’. It also further explains the historical developments that led to the evolution of the feminist movement in three different waves. Later it throws light over the varieties of feminism.

**Chapter Two** elaborately narrates Indian feminism, which is better known as women’s movement. In this chapter, contemporary women’s movements in India and their future prospects are elucidated upon.

**Chapter Three** has a detailed study on the role that Simone de Beauvoir played in development of feminism. Beauvoir became an icon in the history of feminism.

**Chapter Four** is a detailed discussion on the influence of feminism on this world and its institutions.

**Chapter Five** is about the criticism that has been raised against feminism worldwide.

**The Conclusion** sums up “Feminism: An Existential Perspective” with a clarion call to involve ourselves fully in the feminine search.

## CHAPTER 1 FEMINISM: AN INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Etymology and Definitions

The term ‘feminism’ is derived from the Latin word, *femina* meaning women, originally meant ‘having the qualities of females’. It began to be used with reference to the movement for sexual equality and women’s rights, replacing womanism in the 1890s. Dictionaries define it as the advocacy of women’s rights based on the belief in the equality of the sexes, and in its broadest use the word refers to everyone who is aware of, and seeking to end, women’s subordination to man.

According to Donna Hawxhurst and Sue Morrow, “Feminism has only working definitions, since it is a dynamic, constantly changing ideology with many aspects including the personal, political and philosophical. It can never be simply a belief system. Without action, feminism is merely empty rhetoric which cancels itself out”.<sup>1</sup>

Charlotte Bunch points out that feminism is about transforming the society, because everything affects women, every issue is a woman’s issue, and there is a feminism perspective on every subject.<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Berg defines it as “a broad movement embracing numerous phases of women’s emancipation. It is the freedom from sex-determined role freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions, freedom to express her thought fully and to convert them freely into actions”.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2. The Historical Background

Feminist beliefs have existed throughout history, but feminism did not become widespread until the mid 1800s. People regarded women as inferior as and less important than men. Such people believed a woman’s proper place was in the home. The law at that time reflected this opinion. For example, women were barred by law from voting in elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Liss Turtle, *Encyclopedia of Feminism* (London: Arrow Books, 1987), 107, quoted in Abha Avasthi and A K Srivastava, eds., *Modernity, Feminism and Women Empowerment* (New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2001), 144.

<sup>2</sup> Bell Hooks, “Feminism: A Movement to End Oppressions”, in Anna Coote and Ters Gill, ed., *Women’s Rights: A Practical Guide*, 65-6, quoted in Abha Avasthi and A K Srivastava, eds., *Modernity, Feminism and Women Empowerment* (New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2001), 145.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Most professional careers were also closed to women. Despite strong opposition, feminism grew in power during the 1800s and 1900s and won a number of new rights for women. After obtaining the right to vote, feminism started to die out. However, during the mid 1900s, an increasing number of women joined the work forces. They discovered that they were limited in what they were allowed to do and accomplish. This discovery re-ignited the feminist movement during the 1960s. The organizations such as NOW (National Organization for Women) were created and are even now fighting the good fight.

Before “feminism” women were content with their lot. The man of the house worked and the woman of the house stayed at home. It worked out well all around. Some women worked outside home, especially if they were single. However, jobs for women were limited to certain areas.

While there have been, throughout the history of philosophy, many writers who challenged the sexual stereotype, their works do not contribute to a single story<sup>4</sup>. It can therefore be misleading to assimilate them too quickly to the philosophical literature and political campaigns that initiated later feminist movements, or to contemporary feminist positions.

Only by the end of the nineteenth century did the term *la féminisme* appear, put into circulation in France during the 1890s, and rapidly taken up in the rest of Europe and then in America. The label ‘feminist’ arose out of the diverse campaigns for female emancipation fought throughout the nineteenth century—campaigns for the right to vote, for access to education and professions, for the right of married women to own property and have custody of their children, for the abolition of laws about female prostitution which was discriminatory. While the character and success of these movements varied from country to country (for example, women’s suffrage was introduced in New Zealand in 1893, Finland in 1906 and Britain in 1918) they all drew upon and generated arguments about the nature and capacities of women and the character of their oppression, and entertained, explicitly or implicitly, images of what a better condition would be like.

Many of the influential philosophical defenses of women’s emancipation dating from this period were in fact written by people involved in political work—to name only two, John Stuart Mill, the author of *The Subjection of Women*, proposed to the British parliament in

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<sup>4</sup> *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, CD ROM, Version 1.0, s.v. “Feminism.”

1867, an amendment to the Reform Bill designed to give votes to women, while Emily Davies, author of *The Higher Education of Women*, was the foundress of Girton College, Cambridge, the first Women's College of higher education in England.

There is no difficulty in retrospectively classifying works such as these as feminist, although this is not a description their authors would have used, because they contain analyses of women's oppression and proposals for overcoming it which mesh easily with analyses and proposals later regarded as central to the feminist cause. However, there are also significant divergences between feminist writers, past as well as present. Different interpretations of the disadvantages to which women are subject, allied to different conceptions of what would constitute an improvement, gave rise to distinctive and sometimes irreconcilable feminisms.

Historians are bound to select their material in the light of the kind or kinds of feminism that concern them, and to work with interpretations that are used to distinguish texts and movements that qualify as feminist from those that are merely about women. To pursue the examples already discussed, historians whose interest in feminism focuses on the quest for equality between the sexes, may identify certain writers as *feminists avant la lettre*. For example, they may include in their canon *Poulain de la Barre*, author of *De L'Égalité des deux sexes* (1673), or Mary Wollstonecraft. By contrast, a history of feminism understood as the quest for a separate society of women is more likely to pick out Mary Astell's proposal that ladies should retire from the society of men who debar them from realizing the natural desire to advance and perfect their being, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopia "Herland" about an isolated society of women who are able to have children without male assistance. As long as there is more than one interpretation of feminism, feminism will not have a unified history.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3. The Feminist Waves

Feminism, as it stands today, has evolved through three distinct phases. First Wave Feminism began in about 1800 and lasted until the 1930s, was largely concerned with gaining equal rights for women and men. Second Wave Feminism that began in the late 1960s, continued to fight for equality but also developed a range of theories and approaches that stress the difference between women and men and which draw attention to the specific needs

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

of women. These two phases caused the recent developments which could be considered as the Third Wave Feminism. Though, there are overlapping influences, certain distinct traits characterize each stage.

### 1.3.1. The First Wave

First Wave Feminism is used to refer to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century feminist movements that were concerned (although not exclusively) with gaining equal rights of women, particularly the right to suffrage.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest form of feminism was concerned with equal rights for women and men: equal standing as citizens in public life and, to some extent, equal legal status within the home. These ideas emerged in response to the French Revolution and the American War of Independence, both of which advocated values of liberty and equality. Feminists in France argued that the Revolution's values of liberty, equality, and fraternity should apply to all, while women activists in America called for an extension of the principles of the American Declaration of Independence to women, including rights to citizenship and property.

In England, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she demanded equality and better education for women, and made the first sustained critique of the social system which relegated women to an inferior position. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a small group of middle-class women in the United Kingdom began to call for better education, improved legal rights (especially within marriage), employment opportunities, and the right to vote. Equal-rights feminism was given theoretical justification by John Stuart Mill, who wrote *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which was partly influenced by his wife Harriet Taylor. From the 1850s onward, the campaign for equal rights for women became focused on winning the right to vote (women's suffrage), and suffragist movements appeared in New Zealand, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Sweden.

Towards the end of the 19th century, another strand of feminist thinking appeared which questioned social attitudes towards women, including cultural and literary representations and social prescriptions for women's behavior. By the 1920s, feminists began to turn their attention from questions of equality between women and men to issues which mainly concerned women, for example, calling for improved welfare provision for mothers and children. These factors would become stronger in the second wave of feminism.

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Freedman, *Feminism* (New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2002), 4.

### 1.3.2. The Second Wave

The original impetus for the “Second Wave” of feminism came from socialist and Civil Rights movements which emerged in the 1960s in North and Central America, Europe, and Australasia. The women’s liberation movement, which started in the United States, combined liberal, rights-based concerns for equality between women and men with demands for a woman’s right to determine her own identity and sexuality. These two strands of ideology were represented in the seven demands of the movement, established between 1970 and 1978. These were equal pay, equal education and equal opportunities in work, financial and legal independence, free 24-hour nurseries, free contraception and abortion on demand, a woman’s right to define her own sexuality and an end to discrimination against lesbians, and more significantly, freedom from violence and sexual coercion.

This stage refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s, when protest again centered around women’s inequality, although this time not only in terms of women’s lack of equal political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and work.<sup>7</sup>

Central to second-wave feminism is the notion that the personal is political; that is, individual women do not suffer oppression in isolation but as the result of wider social and political systems. This ideology was greatly influenced by the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett, who drew attention to ways in which women were oppressed by the very structure of the Western society. In *The Second Sex* (1949) de Beauvoir argued that Western culture regarded men as normal and women as an aberration and she called for the recognition of the special nature of women. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), drew attention to the ubiquity of patriarchy and to the ways in which it reproduced itself through the family and culture, notably in literature.

Second-wave feminism emphasized upon the physical and psychological differences between women and men. Some feminists criticized traditional psychoanalysis, notably the work of Sigmund Freud, for assuming that all people are, or should be, like men. They became concerned with ways in which women’s perceptions were determined by the particular nature of the female body and the female roles in reproduction and childbearing. This strand of feminism, which became known as cultural or radical feminism, focused on

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

differences between women and men that they believed make women superior to men, and advocated female forms of culture.

A powerful strand of feminism is concerned with the ways in which men have controlled and subordinated women's bodies. For example, Mary Daly argued in *Gyn/Ecology* (1979) that patriarchy coerced women into heterosexuality, using violence to suppress women's powers and sexuality. Feminists have argued that sexual and domestic violence are not isolated incidents, but are central to the subordination of women by patriarchy. In response to these threats, feminists asserted women's legal rights to their own bodies, including the importance of the right to choose motherhood. They have also looked at ways in which women might use motherhood as a source of strength and as a way of influencing future generations, rather than as a means of reproducing patriarchy. In particular, some feminists have advocated different forms of parenting, as single mothers or within lesbian relationships.

### **1.3.3. The Third Wave**

Feminist theorizing at this stage became more varied and forceful than ever. For example, Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist writer, in her book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) voiced against the dominating and violent aspects of porn while Carrol Giligan, a Harvard psychologist, in her celebrated book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) returned to the debates regarding the essential gender differences. Around the same time, Rianne Eisher in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) rejuvenated the importance of maternity to feminism.

Notwithstanding these and many more genuine attempts at theorizing, one of the main features of this period was that feminism turned its critical techniques back on feminism's own long standing habit of making claims on behalf of women. These purportedly universal pronouncements, it was pointed out, failed to take account of the differences between women of diverse races, sexual orientations, nationalities and classes. The general feeling was that there is nothing to be said about women as such and we must become more sensitive to the many conceptions of femininity found in different societies.

## **1.4. The Varieties of Feminism**

### **1.4.1. Liberal Feminism**

Liberal Feminists, being influenced by liberal ideology demand equal political rights for women. They believe in autonomy of the female self and demand equal opportunities for women. They want all sorts of gender discriminations to be abolished. To them the biological differences are just accidental. They insist on equal treatment towards women in all spheres. They oppose gender roles which compel women to do monotonous work all the time. They contend that since women are as much rational and autonomous as men are, they also must have equal opportunity to exercise their rational power and to affirm their autonomy. Liberal feminists insist on economic independence for women in order that they may experience and enjoy full identity and freedom.

Liberal Feminists include all those who campaign for equal rights for women within the framework of the liberal state, arguing that the theoretical basis on which the state is built is sound but that the rights and privileges it confers must be extended to women to give them equal citizenship with men.<sup>8</sup> In short, what liberal feminists want to do is to show that the justification and arguments against women are totally wrong and mistaken.<sup>9</sup>

#### **1.4.2. Marxist Feminism**

Marxists desperately tried to integrate women in their class struggle and incorporated women's problems in their struggle against capitalism. They placed the question of women's liberation in the wider context of the transformation of the mode of production, economically as well as culturally. As regards women's liberation they are of the view that capitalism must be overthrown since it exploits women as wage laborers.

For Marxist Feminists, the first step for the working class women in entering the arena of struggle is to leave the isolation of homes and enter the social arena of production. Marxist and Social Feminists link gender inequality and women's oppression to the capitalist system of production and the diversion of labour consistent with this system.<sup>10</sup>

#### **1.4.3. Radical Feminism**

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<sup>8</sup> Freedman, *Feminism*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Freedman, *Feminism* 5.

Radical Feminism was the result of the disillusionment resulted from the failure of Marxist Feminism. According to radical feminists, in order to liberate women, it is not capitalism that is to be overthrown but patriarchy. Above all, they opposed the growing sexual crimes against women. The analyses of radical feminism points out the need for women to escape from cages of forced motherhood and sexual slavery. Hence, the immediate goal of radical feminist politics is for women to regain control over their own bodies. In the long run, the radical feminists seek to overthrow patriarchy and to create a new society informed by the radical feminist values of wholeness, trust and nurturance of sexuality, joy and mildness.

Radical Feminists see men's domination of women as the result of the system of patriarchy which is independent of all other social structures – that is, it is not a product of capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

#### **1.4.4. Socialist Feminism**

Feminists who belong to what is known as Socialist Feminism attempt to combine, the anti-patriarchal views of Radical Feminism and anti-capitalist ideas of Marxism. After highlighting clearly the patriarchal features in capitalism, they try to reconstruct the concept of socialism which can offer true liberation to women. The Socialist Feminist analysis of women's oppression shows that women's liberation requires a totally new mode of organizing all forms of production. Social Feminism also tries to study radical, colonial, class, caste and ecological problems. Socialist Feminists believe that when we speak about women's oppression as well as liberation it should not be in vague undifferentiated or a-historical terms. They claim that what they are advocating is the total liberation for women.

Social feminists have spent much time thinking about issues leading to the development of a rich body of feminist thought and practice. Six of the central features of socialist feminism are—*capitalism/class, revolution, patriarchy, psychoanalysis, subjectivity and difference*. Clearly socialist feminism has been deeply influenced by Marxism and therefore, Marxist theories of class and capitalism initially inspired socialist feminists.<sup>12</sup>

#### **1.4.5. Postmodern Feminism**

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism*, 17.

Postmodernism has a reputation for being inaccessible and very difficult to understand. Whether this is a fair or significant assessment or whether it applies to postmodern feminism as well are moot points. Despite the alleged inaccessibility, it is still possible to select some central features of this form of feminism. These features could equally well apply to postmodernism on its own, thus begging the question, ‘Where and what is the feminism in postmodern feminism?’<sup>13</sup>

Postmodern feminism emerges from two main sources. First, out of criticisms of modernist feminist theorizing and second, perhaps obviously, from postmodern and post-structural thought. Following this, postmodern feminists are equally keen to expose the flaws and weaknesses of traditional feminisms, particularly with regard to their modernist commitments. One of the significant aspects is the destabilization of the category of woman. Modernist feminists typically draw upon ideas about the human subject which developed from the age of the Enlightenment.

Postmodernist claim that the existence of an ‘ultimate’ subject, whether God or man, is an illusion. If modernists think of the human subject like an apple, with a vital core, then the postmodernists think of the subject more like an onion—peel away the layers and there is nothing there at the end or at the core. This does not mean that human subjects (people) do not exist or are not important. It is to do with questions about forms of human subjects and what constitutes them. For modernists there is an ultimate core to the self or the subject which inspires modernist feminists to ‘tell it like it is’ about woman in other words to say what woman is and should be. Postmodernist feminists on the other hand, claim that there is no vital core and thus prefer to ask ‘How do women become or get said?’<sup>14</sup>

Postmodernist feminists also claim that fixing an identity on a woman is not a good idea. For these feminists, the last thing a ‘girl’ should want is to be tied to an identity, whatever it is. In many ways postmodern feminists do not care what that identity is.<sup>15</sup> A postmodern feminist task is not then to find out what a woman is, but to expose the power/truth/knowledge game that goes on in defining what woman is.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26.

It is certainly the case that postmodernists are keen to develop ideas about the social world that do not rely on the traditional understanding.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary postmodern feminism thus emerges out of the conflicts within feminist theorizing and the influence of postmodernist thought. Postmodern feminism thus is aligned with the deconstructive strategies of postmodernism in general but has a specific interest in gender and the feminine/female.

As the influence of feminism spread throughout the Western world, in India also the seed of feminism began sprouting silently. Though, the women's movements of India cannot be called strictly feminist, for several reasons, systematic activities centered around the lives of women did affect the history of India. That leads us to the next chapter, Indian feminist movement.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 2 INDIAN FEMINISM**

It is by now generally accepted that there is no one women's movement in India, but rather, several women's movements. That is, when we consider movements that specifically raise questions of gender, it is clear that in terms of political understanding, ideology, social base and modes of action, there are rich, complex and contentious debates that rage among them. In addition, 'The Women's Movement' is often used also to refer to women's participation in politics in general and not just to the specific interventions in politics which challenge various forms of patriarchy and gender injustice. The women's movement could be considered as feminist movement in India.

### **2.1. Women's Movement: The Spark**

Initially campaigns for the betterment of the conditions of women's lives were taken up, interestingly by men. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women had begun to organize themselves and gradually they took up a number of causes such as education, the conditions of women's work and so on. It was in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that women's organizations were set up, and many of the women who were active in these later became involved in the freedom movement.

### **2.2. The National Movement and Women**

One of the landmarks in the rise of an organized women's movement was the formation of the All India Women's Conference in 1927. Originally, it was set up to discuss the issue of female education, but it soon found this question could not be addressed without looking at other issues such as *purdah* and child-marriage. From here came the realization that these questions could not be separated from India's political subjection.

Apart from the feminist agenda, women in India also had a nationalist agenda. Women joined the Indian National Congress committees, took part in all forms of civil disobedience and were prominent in the communist party and revolutionary terrorist groups.

The question has been raised by later scholars and feminists as to how far women in the national movement were 'feminist' as opposed to being 'nationalist'. Certainly the women's movement did not call itself feminist, because that would imply priority to women's liberation, so it stressed rather, the joint struggle for national and gender equality.

### 2.3. The History of the Women's Movement in India<sup>18</sup>

The movement can be seen in the form of three 'waves'. The first can be said to have begun with the mass mobilization of women during the national movement. After independence, for over a decade, there was a lull in political activity by women. The legitimacy accorded to the post-independence state and the developmental programmes launched by the government blunted the edge of militancy. Gradually however, the economic policies adopted by the ruling classes were unfolding its logic. Growing unemployment and rising prices led to mass uprisings, especially in Gujarat and Bihar. This period, from the late 1960s onwards, can be called the second wave, with a resurgence of political activity by women.

By the 1960s it was clear that many of the promises of Independence were still unfulfilled. It was thus that the 1960s and 1970s saw a spate of movements in which women took part: campaigns against rising prices, movements for land rights, peasant movements. Women from different parts of the country came together to form groups both inside and outside political parties. Everywhere, in the different movements that were sweeping the country, women participated in large numbers. Everywhere, their participation resulted in transforming the movements from within.

The Indian Left splintered in the early 1970s, and there was a questioning of earlier analyses of revolution. In Maharashtra, the United Women's Anti Price-Rise Front, formed in 1973 by Socialists and Communists, rapidly became a mass women's movement for consumer protection. The movement spread and linked up with the students' agitation against corruption in Gujarat, and it became a massive middle class movement which soon shifted its focus to an overall critique of the Indian state. The struggle was crushed by brutal police repression and the declaration of the Emergency.

It was actually after the Emergency in 1975-76 that many of the contemporary women's groups known as third wave feminists began to get formed, with their members often being women with a history of involvement in other political movements. This revolutionary move by the women activists spread all over rapidly, uniting women of all the corners of India.

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<sup>18</sup> Nivedita Menon, ed., *Gender and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18.

## 2.4. Early Feminist Campaigns

The distinguishing features of the new women's groups were that they declared themselves to be 'feminist' despite the fact that most of their members were drawn from the Left, which saw feminism as bourgeois and divisive. They insisted on being autonomous even though most of their members were affiliated to other political groups, generally of the far Left. This fact influenced the feminist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s in complex ways.

One of the main questions that feminists raised in the late 1970s was how could women be organized and represented? While there was a general agreement that it was not the role of feminist groups to organize or represent women, there was considerable disagreement on why this was so. For some, feminist groups were in essence urban and middle class and so could neither represent Indian women as a whole nor organize them; others believed that, although autonomy was necessary for the development of feminist theory, in practice it would divide existing organizations and movements. The role of feminist groups, therefore, was to raise feminist issues in mass organizations such as trade unions or *Kisan Samitis* (peasant committees), which would then be in a position to organize and represent women as well as men. Yet others believed that once a women's movement began, it would naturally spread and grow in multiple ways, creating its own organizations and representatives, and so it was superfluous for feminist groups to debate whether they should organize and represent women.

Many groups opted for autonomy, which they defined as separate, women-only groups without any party affiliation or conventional organizational structure, which they considered hierarchical, self-interested, and competitive. By contrast, the women's groups that were formed in the late 1970s were loosely organized and without formal structures or funds. The only party based women's organization to be formed in the late 1970s was the *Mahila Dakshata Samiti* (Women's Self-Development Organization), which was founded in 1977 by socialist women in the coalition Janata Party.<sup>19</sup>

Though the feminist campaigns in the late 1970s and early 1980s were dominated by the new city-based groups, a similar growth of feminist consciousness had taken place in certain rural movements also.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 348.

### 2.4.1. The Movement Against Dowry

One of the first issues to receive countrywide attention from women's groups was violence against women, specifically in the form of rape, and what came to be known in India as 'dowry deaths'—the killing of young married women for 'dowry' and the money or goods they were supposed to bring along with them during the marriage. This was also the beginning of a process of learning for women. Most of these protests were directed at the state level, because women were able to mobilize support, the State responded, seemingly positively, by changing the law on rape and dowry, making both more stringent. This seemed, at the time, like a great victory. It was only later that the knowledge began to sink in that mere changes in the law meant little, unless there was a will and a machinery to implement them at the grass-root level, and that the core of the problem of discrimination against women lay not only in the law, but was much more widespread.

Campaigns against dowry deaths now began to be taken up by neighborhood groups, teachers' associations, and trade unions. Within feminist groups a series of strategies were devised to enhance public awareness of the problems associated with dowry: *Stri Sangharsh* produced a street play, *Om Swaha* (priests' incantation around the ritual wedding fire), that attracted large crowds all over India. *Manushi*, a Delhi-based feminist magazine, organized a series of public meetings at which people pledged neither to take nor give dowry.

Overall the agitation against dowry-related crimes led feminists to varying conclusions. On the one hand, they discovered they could get massive public support for campaigns against certain kinds of crimes against women, such as dowry-related murder.

On the other hand, they found how difficult it was to work with the law against such crimes. This latter experience was repeated in regard to rape also.

### 2.4.2. The Agitation Against Rape

Beginning just a few months after the campaign against dowry related crimes, the agitation against rape started with campaigns against police rape. The scale and frequency of police rape are quite startling in India.

When the new feminist groups were formed in the late 1970s, they were already familiar with the categories of police and landlord rape, for both, especially the former, had

been addressed by the Maoist movement. The issue of police rape achieved new significance in 1978.

In 1979, there were women's demonstrations against incidents of 'police and landlord or employer rape' in many parts of the country. Campaigns against these incidents, however, remained isolated from each other until 1980, when an open letter by four senior lawyers against a judgment in a case of police rape in Maharashtra sparked off a campaign by feminist groups. The campaign against rape marked a new stage in the development of feminism in India.

## **2.5. Growth and Maturing of the Movement**

These early years of the contemporary Indian women's movement taught women's groups a series of lessons, of which the foremost was that there was considerable public support—from men as well as women—for campaigns against gender oppression. In effect, a handful of feminists discovered that they could garner public support and influence policy even though their numbers were small and their groups weak. However, this discovery did not bring unmixed pleasure, for it also entailed having to deal with the political exploitation of feminist campaigns, as in the movement against rape.

By the early 1980s, feminism had branched into a series of activities ranging from the production of literature and audiovisual material to slum-improvement work, employment-generating schemes, health education, and trade unions. New attempts to organize women worker's unions were made. By this stage the feminist movement had diversified from issue-based groups into distinct organizational identities.

The first professions to feel the influence of feminism were journalism, academia, and medicine.<sup>20</sup> Soon after the feminist movement began, most of the major English-language dailies had deputed one or more women journalists to write exclusively on feminist issues, and a network of women journalists evolved. In Bombay, this network was formalized into a women journalists' group in the mid-1980s, with the purpose of lobbying for better reporting on women's issues, such as dowry, rape, and widow immolation. Feminism thus had a much wider audience than before. While the influence of feminism in medicine has been less

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 358.

effective than in journalism or academics, the connection between theory and activity has been closer here than in the other two.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most significant development for women in the last few decades has been the introduction of 33% reservation for women in local, village-level elections. In the early days, when this move was introduced, there was considerable skepticism.

While the problems still remain, in a greater or lesser degree, what is also true is that more and more women have shown that once they have power, they are able to use it, to the benefit of society in general and women in particular.

## **2.6. Counter Movements Against Feminist Ideas**

The early 1980s witnessed a series of counter movements against feminist ideas by sections of traditionalist society. The rise of these counter movements was partly related to the spread of feminism and the influence it was beginning to have on women's attitudes, especially within the family. The kind of support that women's centers gave to women who were being harassed for dowry or forced into marriages, provoked a considerable degree of public and private hostility, and feminists began to face attacks from irate families in person and through the police and the courts. However, where earlier such attacks would have led to a wave of sympathy for the feminists, from the mid-1980s they were accompanied by a public, and increasingly sophisticated, critique of feminism. Much of this criticism took place in a context of growing communalism.

## **2.7. Criticism of Indian Feminism**

In recent years, the euphoria of the 1970s and early 1980s, symbolized by street-level protests, campaigns in which groups mobilized at a national level, the sense of a commonality of experience cutting across class, caste, region and religion—all this seems to have gone, replaced by a more considered and complex response to issues. In many parts of India, women are no longer to be seen out on the streets protesting about this or that form of injustice. This apparent lack of a visible movement has led to the accusation that the women's movement is dead or dying.

Other whipping sticks have been brought out: little has happened to improve women's lives, so how can the movement be called successful? Activists within the movement are

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 359.

urban, westernized and middle class, so the movement was considered alien, a western product. It has little to do with the lives of thousands of poor, rural, underprivileged women all over India.

## **2.8. The Response**

The reality is somewhat different. While the participation of urban, middle class women is undeniable, it is not they who make up the backbone of the movement, or of the many, different campaigns that are generally seen as comprising the movement. The anti-alcohol agitation in Andhra Pradesh and similar campaigns in other parts of India were started and sustained by poor, low-caste, often working-class women. The movement to protect the environment was begun by poor women in a village called Reni in the northern hill regions of India, and only after that did it spread to other parts of the country. There are many numbers of such examples.

## **2.9. Contemporary Women's Movement in India**

The contemporary Indian women's movement is a complex, variously placed, and fertile undertaking. It is perhaps the only movement today that encompasses and links such issues as work, wages, environment, ecology, civil rights, sex, violence, representation, caste, class, allocation of basic resources, consumer rights, health, religion, community, and individual and social relationships.

An index of the movement's influence is the extraordinarily large participation of women in most radical campaigns, particularly in urban areas. One of the most notable examples of the radicalization of women is that of the Bhopal gas victims. Following the tragic explosion of MIC gas from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal in 1984, the one organization of gas victims that emerged strong and sustained was the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathana (Bhopal Gas-Affected Women Workers' Organization). Though the organization is not feminist (indeed, it is headed by a man), a number of feminist groups work with it, and it is linked to the women's movement.

Structurally the women's movement has a vertical as well as horizontal reach: from a horizontal network of autonomous feminist groups. Issue- and occupation-based women's organizations, development groups, radical professional associations, and party affiliated organizations, reached upward to administrative institutions, state functionaries, members of Parliament, and political leaders. Feminists are now invited to lecture at the Indian

Administrative Services Academy, the training school for Indian government servants; they provide courses for the police, who have considerably expanded their employment of women; and many state governments have invited them to organize women's development programmes. In many ways it is the horizontal reach of the women's movement that has allowed it to have policy influence; in particular, the combination of the networking capacities of the autonomous groups and the mobilizing capacities of the Left party-affiliated organizations has often given women's campaigns a cutting edge.

In many areas women are pioneering literacy campaigns. Increasing numbers of women are taking advantage of cooperative credit facilities. New avenues for women's political participation have opened at village and district levels.

Another development to watch with interest is the diasporic links among Indian women's groups. This diasporic network is unusual and could become an important source of mobilization against communal identity politics.<sup>22</sup>

## **2.10. The Future Prospects**

It is important to recognize that for a country of India's magnitude, change in male-female relations and the kinds of issues the women's movement is focusing on, will not come easy. For every step the movement takes forward, there will be a possible backlash, a possible regression. But this backlash could lead to positive results. The women, who are denied opportunities to come forward and hence oppressed, are more motivated to take up the cause more seriously. This makes possible for women who can aspire to, and attain, the highest political office in the country, and for women to continue to have to confront patriarchy within the home, in the workplace, throughout their lives.

The women's movement in India today is a rich and vibrant movement, which has spread to various parts of the country. It is often said that there is no one single cohesive movement in the country, but a number of fragmented campaigns. Activists see this as one of the strengths of the movement which takes different forms in different parts. While the movement may be scattered all over India, they feel it is nonetheless a strong and plural force. Therefore, the future is predicted to be bright and clear with dreams unlimited.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

In India, women's movement is beginning to show results. The society accepts the equality of both sexes. The Indian society is still patriarchal and hence the space for women to actualize and to assert themselves is limited. Yet we hope that women's movement will lead to a more radical feminist movement. This does not mean that we are going to ape the Western feminism. An authentic Indian way of being feminine has to be sought and put into practice by the Indian feminists.

Third wave feminism suggests that women are different and distinct. The well-being of the society depends on each man and woman; neither can develop without the other. The feminist movement in India invites Indians to affirm the uniqueness of the feminine, to cherish their uniqueness and thus giving them a right place in human society, because it is a woman who ultimately is responsible for the uplift of the society.

## CHAPTER 3

### FEMINISM: AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

#### 3.1. Simone de Beauvoir and Feminism

There are a certain number of women who exalt menstruation, maternity, etc. and who believe that one can find a basis there for a different sort of writing. I am absolutely against all this, since, in my opinion, it means to fall once more into a masculine trap.... there is no reason to fall into some wild narcissism and build on the basis of these given a system which would be the culture and life of women.

-Simone de Beauvoir<sup>23</sup>

Hazel Barnes, a well-known contributor to feminism, once wrote that Beauvoir has “taken philosophy personally, has personalized it”<sup>24</sup>. Personalizing philosophy may in some cases result in philosophizing life itself. After all, one’s philosophy to a great extent is entwined with one’s way of life.

##### 3.1.1. Life and Works

Simone de Beauvoir was born on January 9, 1908 in Paris and lived there almost all her life. Her parents belonged to the bourgeoisie and provided her with a traditional Catholic education. After studies at the Sorbonne, Beauvoir took an agrégation in philosophy in 1929 (that is, a higher teaching exam) at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure. There she met Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom she entered a lifelong bond of intellectual companionship. They never married, nor had any children, but stayed together in a free liaison, allowing intimate relations with others.

In the 1930s, they both studied the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard. During and after the war, Beauvoir developed an interest in Hegel and Marx, especially in the philosophy of the young Marx.<sup>25</sup> In 1945 Beauvoir, Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty founded *Les Temps Modernes*, a literary, philosophical and political journal. The same year, Sartre and Beauvoir became known as

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<sup>23</sup> Luis David, “Feminism and Michel Foucault,” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Philippines: Ateneo De Manila University, 1997), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Hazel Barnes, “Response to Eleanore Holveck,” *Philosophy Today* (Special Supplement, 1998), vols., 29-34: 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, CD ROM, Version 1.0, s.v. “Simone de Beauvoir”.

‘existentialists’, a label they reluctantly accepted. Both became leading intellectuals of their generation and politically engaged as non-affiliated leftists.<sup>26</sup>

Beauvoir, for her part, also inspired and participated in the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* which became a definitive statement of the contemporary feminist movement. Her major philosophical works include *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). She is popular for her autobiography published in three volumes: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), *Prime of Life* (1960), and *Force of Circumstance* (1963). Her philosophical novels include *The Blood of Others* (1945), *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *The Mandarins* (1954). Simone de Beauvoir died of pneumonia on April 14, 1986 and was buried alongside Sartre at the *Cimetière du Montparnasse* in Paris, France.<sup>27</sup>

The most prominent feature of Beauvoir’s philosophy is its ethical orientation together with an analysis of the subordination of women. Her critique of the concept of woman as the *Other* is central to twentieth-century feminist theory.

### **3.1.2. Towards an Existentialist Feminism: The Starting Point**

Simone de Beauvoir’s tryst with existentialism began with her studies together with Sartre on the philosophical positions of Soren Kierkegaard. She explored many of the existentialist doctrines in her philosophical novels, such as *She Came to Stay*, and *The Blood of Others*. Her first philosophical essay *Ethics of Ambiguity* was also an existentialist treatment of the human situation. But it was in *The Second Sex*, that Beauvoir embarked on existentialism extensively to identify the true sources and reasons of woman’s perennial oppression.

### **3.1.3. Existentialism**

Existentialism is a philosophical movement, which came into prominence in Continental Europe between the two World Wars. Through it cannot be defined comprehensively; existentialism implies a passionate return of the individual to his/her own subjectivity, in order to extract the significance of his/her being. It studies our concrete individual actions and moods, in an intense attempt to understand people in their individuality and differences. ‘Existence precedes essence’ is the most popular existentialist credo.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Encarta Encyclopedia Standard 2003*, CD ROM, “Simone de Beauvoir”.

Existentialists claim that essence does not determine existence. An individual has no essential nature, no self-identity other than that involved in the act of choosing. Abstractions can never grasp nor communicate the reality of individual existence. The universe does not provide moral rules. Moral principles are constructed by humans in the context of being responsible for their actions and the actions of others. Individuals have complete freedom of the will. Individual cannot help but make choices. An individual can become completely other than what he/she is. Beauvoir in her analysis of the oppression of woman makes use of these existentialist perspectives.

Existentialism, Beauvoir argued in her introduction, would be the perspective out of which she will be able to understand women's situation.<sup>28</sup> An existentialist feminism, Beauvoir believed, can offer an analysis of women's oppression and their freedom.

### **3.1.4. *The Second Sex: An Existentialist Feministic Ideology***

In 1940 Simone de Beauvoir published what was to become a definitive statement of the contemporary feminist movement: *The Second Sex*. This magnum opus, with its critical analysis of the situation of women hitherto unprecedented in history, filled the gap between the first two waves of feminism.

One of the important insights given by Beauvoir is that woman is the product of civilization. In her own words: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No psychological or economical fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature"<sup>29</sup>. Beauvoir claims that there is no unchangeable feminine essence. There is no essential feminine character which is predetermined, but a woman is the product of a civilization. Beauvoir establishes this thesis, which she was building up in the analysis of the oppression of woman, by an examination of the formative years of a child.

In her description of the childhood, Beauvoir views that the way children are born and weaned and nursed is the same for both sexes; they have the same interests and same pleasures. Therefore, if well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy woman seems to us to be already determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom

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<sup>28</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H M Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xxxiii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

her to passivity, coquetry, and maternity. It is because “she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years.”<sup>30</sup>

A woman, from the very beginning, is taught that to be valuable she must try to please, she must make herself an object for men and so she should renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. The mother while treating daughter saddles the child with her own destiny. The mother applies herself to changing the child into a woman like her. The treasures of female wisdom are poured into girl’s ears; feminine virtues are instilled in her heart.

In her family life, she is introduced to the relative rank and the hierarchy of the sexes. She is made to realize that she is to become one day a woman like her mother and she will never be the sovereign father. The historical and literary culture to which she belongs, and the songs and legends with which she is lulled to sleep help to confirm superiority of the male in the eyes of the little girl. It is stamped on her mind that her supreme necessity is to charm the masculine heart. She equips herself for this by adorning herself. The delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl by parents and educators, and through books and myths. This indoctrination even seems to continue in her marriage and sexual initiation.

According to Beauvoir, “Reared by women within a feminine world, a woman’s normal destiny is marriage.”<sup>31</sup> Women are made to believe that marriage alone permits them to keep their social dignity intact. She is made to believe that in marriage she is elevated into a state of freedom, fulfilling her true role as woman. But Beauvoir argues that, by envisaging fulfillment as the loved one and mother in marriage, woman only ends up as a slave to her husband, she remains for the man the inessential Other. This is clearly shown in the following statement of Beauvoir:

In her eyes the man incarnates the other as she does for the man; but this Other seems to her to be on the plane of the essential, and with reference to the man she sees herself as the inessential. She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold; she will open up her future, not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile into the hands of a new master.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., xxxv.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 368.

An important point that Beauvoir wants to make here, as she does throughout the second part of *The Second Sex*, is that the resignation of woman to man, does not come from any predetermined inferiority. On the contrary, this resignation has its source in the adolescent girl's past, in the society around her and particularly in the future assigned to her.<sup>33</sup>

In short, Beauvoir insisted that womanhood, as we know it today, is a social contract. That is, the subordination of female to male does not represent an immutable state of nature, but is the result of various social forces. At the same time, by asserting that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, Beauvoir hints at the importance of human intervention and action in becoming a person. This enables one to counter the determination of simple biological or cultural explanations.

The subordination of woman is explained in *The Second Sex* not only as a social and historical phenomenon, but also from an existentialist perspective. Influenced by Sartre, she explains the oppression and submission of women, using many of the existentialist notions. It is widely known that though at the time of her writing *The Second Sex*, she did not like to be called a feminist, but she reluctantly accepted the label of being called an existentialist. So, it is clear through *The Second Sex* Beauvoir was moving towards an existentialist feminism.

In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explicitly positioned herself not as a woman or feminist, but as an existentialist. In *The Second Sex*, there is always palpably present in each chapter—whether on a woman's sex life, her professional life, her religiosity, or her household duties—the framing metaphysics of the human condition as laid out by Sartre.

### **3.1.5. Woman's Oppression: An Existentialist Perspective**

For Beauvoir male appropriation of private property is only intelligible as an individual's project of self-assertion and transcendence. The 'otherness' of women is prior to property relations and is needed to understand why property relations take the forms they do. Thus, from her existentialist perspective Beauvoir gives an alternative account of sexism's origins that answers the question why it was not women who asserted property rights. This is not, she argued, because of any feminine essence, but because of the situation. A woman's situation is radically different from a man's. She must give birth and she must endure the bodily upset, distortion and pain which accompany the fact that she is passive in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

reproduction, a prey to natural forces, not a creator or manufacturer, imposing her design on the world. Historically it was and even today it is man who competes, who kills, who risks his life, who dares. But these are not that a woman cannot do, but her situation forbids her active participation. The superiority is given not to the sex which gives birth but to the sex that kills. It is this risk of death that allows a man to grow, to become a subject, and to become a free human being.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.1.6. Realizing Woman's Subjectivity

Another point of influence of Sartrean existentialism is found in Beauvoir's treatment of sexuality. For Beauvoir, as for Sartre, the sexual relation is the locus where conflict between the self and the other is played out most intensely. "Sartre's account of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness*, even when it is not most explicitly sexual, carries this suggestion of sexual intimacy where the encounter between the self and the other is unavoidable."<sup>35</sup>

Beauvoir, in her open treatment of sexuality agreed with Sartre that physical desire is not a simple physiological response. Desire comes first and the physical manifestation of desire later. Sex cannot be seen as simple subjective pleasure, like scratching an itch or drinking a glass of water. Sexuality is no longer a physical function outside politics, appropriately discussed by scientists; it is the very heart of the philosophical because it is the place where individuals most narrowly intersect, where they confront most painfully the distance and conflict that divides them from others.

Unfortunately in that encounter as in so many others the woman's subjectivity is compromised. The sex act Beauvoir argued, forces a woman into a particular role, that of a passive object. Furthermore this disability may then infect all her other non-sexual dealings with the world. A woman is put in the position of making a choice: she will be aggressive and successful or she will be sexually attractive. The two are not compatible. At her job she must not dress provocatively. She must be manly and aggressive. She must devote herself to her work and not to endless shopping for clothes. She will then be allowed to work with men but at the expense of her sexuality because the same men will not find her behaviour sexually attractive.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 86.

The incompatibility between a woman's sexual being and her professional life goes deeper than socialization. Beauvoir located it in the sex act itself. In the sex act, man presents himself as a conqueror, as a dominator. In Beauvoir's own words, "To express the fact that he has copulated with a woman a man says he has 'possessed her', or 'has "had" her'.... So for the lover the act of love is a conquest, victory."<sup>36</sup> There is, in the act, always passivity on woman's part. She is penetrated while the man plays the active role. Therefore, a woman in sex must always feel herself as a thing, an object, and in conflict with her professional assertive self. She must choose either a sexless professional life or a passive passionate one. To succeed at work is not enough. A woman is expected to be like a man, thus becoming a person for others—that is they must in relationships, and especially in sexual relations, be able to realize themselves as subjects.

### 3.1.7. A Step Ahead of Sartre

Sartre's subject-in-love is easily recognizable in Beauvoir's male who comes to the sex act as master. As a woman, however, Beauvoir approached sexuality from another point of view. The man comes as a subject, as used to 'transcendence' but embarrassed by his bodily involvement in which his transcendence is compromised. He must come to terms with the fact that he is a body, an uncontrollable physicality. The woman, on the other hand, comes to the sex act as immanence, as flesh, not only because this is the way man sees her, but also because of her role in reproduction. Since she already must suffer the immanence of reproduction, she must struggle even harder for her dignity. The man, on the other hand, used to autonomy and control, will be the initiator. Every woman, Beauvoir asserted, must remember her first 'deflowering', which must always be a kind of rape of her body.<sup>37</sup> Given the anatomy of the sex act, given the fact of male penetration, women will always have to play a more passive role, if not suffer a kind of defilement or pollution. Women are always the sex objects.

The only possible answer was reciprocity, seemingly impossible on existentialist principle. Sartre had left open only the possibility of an alteration of roles; each lover could have his or her turn at being subject. Beauvoir tried to describe a more satisfying kind of equality. The man can desire the flesh of the woman, while recognizing her freedom. The woman though passive, may consent freely to her submission. In her own words:

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<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 418.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

The dissimilarity that exists between the eroticism of the male and that of the female creates insoluble problems as long as there is a “battle of the sexes”; they can be solved when woman finds in the male both desire and respect; if he lusts after the flesh while recognizing her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential, her integrity remains unimpaired while she makes herself object; she remains free in the submission of which she consents. Under such conditions the lovers can enjoy a common pleasure, in the fashion suitable for each, the partners each feeling the pleasure as being his or her own but as having its source in another.<sup>38</sup>

These lines also point to the fact that Beauvoir went a step ahead of Sartre’s view of the sex act as manipulative, faintly disgusting play with female flesh. She tried to bridge the existentialist distance between lovers. It is not that the woman feels that she is the man or the man feels that he is the woman. The two are no longer hostile. The man sees his pleasure as coming from the woman, and is therefore dependent; the woman gives herself as a gift and is therefore active and keeps her dignity. Both accept their situation but transcend it.

The woman’s active submission can at the same time be distinguished from the bad faith of becoming an object for someone else’s pleasure, because the woman is passive not for someone else’s pleasure but for her own. “Woman can transcend caresses, excitement, and penetration, towards the attainment of her own pleasure, thus upholding her subjectivity.”<sup>39</sup> Beauvoir’s woman must transcend the proprietary of male hand toward her own pleasure. She gives herself for herself; she will also be active. For this to happen, however, the man must see the woman as his equal. Once the woman is seen as a subject, then reciprocity in the sex act is possible. Two equal subjects now confront each other, give to each other, and enjoy each other.

### **3.2. A Summary of Beauvoir’s Feminism**

One of profound contributions of Beauvoir to feminist philosophy lies in her insistence that women’s comparative lack of freedom does not consist merely in lack of civil rights, or in particular institutions of motherhood and marriage, although these are contributory factors. Rather women are kept in their place by “the whole civilization”—by a multitude of evaluations and social practices, which shape our understandings of male and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 446.

female, masculine and feminine. As she indicated in her celebrated remark, one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, Beauvoir holds that it is through social practices that bodies come to be understood as sexually differentiated, and through these same practices that the differences between them are invested with significance. Becoming a woman is a cultural and a historical process, which is never completed. Although Beauvoir allows that there will always be differences between women and men deriving from their bodily distinctions and the effects these have on their sensuality, there is no one thing that women intrinsically or naturally are. Correspondingly there is no discernable limit to what they may become.

Beauvoir did not consider herself as a radical feminist. However, her analysis of relations between the sexes tends throughout *The Second Sex* towards a form of existential radical feminism. The idea of the equality and similarity of all human beings was essential to Beauvoir's feminism. She believed that it is women's human status that will allow full subjectivity to women. Therefore, Beauvoir was always explicit on two issues: that there is no feminine specificity and that one must not reject male models.

Simone de Beauvoir's feminist ideas sent shock waves among the philosophers in the mid-twentieth century. Her thoughts expressed through her writings, particularly in *The Second Sex*, influenced the feminist worldview. Beauvoir's feminism which later came to be identified as existential feminism has had its effect in the feminist search. Many of the modern feminist thinkers have adapted their methods of feminism from the original thought stream of Beauvoir. Therefore, Simone de Beauvoir remains to be a leading figure in the history of feminism.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE IMPACT OF FEMINISM

When the well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked about which were, in her opinion, the most decisive moments of human development along time, she answered with conviction:

There are four periods after which nothing was again the same: a) the moment of evolution (the leaping life-spirit), b) the glacial period, c) the age of industrialisation, d) and the one of feminist movements.<sup>40</sup>

Not many men and women are yet involved, but nevertheless there is a slow but steady growth in the number of thinkers and sociologists, etc...who hold this same viewpoint and who, more specifically, assert that it refers to the influential events and the ideological advances of the twentieth century. They point out that if we must consider something to be significant for the future of humanity, it is precisely this growing and deepening of feminist thought and action in the world. It affects the whole human being, the way of being man and woman, our identity, and global relations.

This matter of “woman” is not something transitory, it is not an interesting “theme”, neither is it something more or less marginal in human existence. It is part of the foundation and it deeply affects all existence, the very “framework” of the world, where all problems are interrelated.

The economy, politics, education, work, language, sexuality... all are repositioned by the presence or the absence of the women. The impact of feminism refers to the way of being and of feeling, life and relationships, of reconstructing the world. The effect of it is concerned with the roots of justice. It goes deep within to find a new *paradigm*, a different model. It indicates a path which leads from hierarchical relations to others that are equalized. And it has repercussions on the totality of our life, not only because everything is interrelated, but also because, it affects humanity, in its profoundest configuration as person, in both the ways of being fully woman and the ways of being fully man.

Feminism is a natural concept that takes place at the grass-roots level but affecting

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<sup>40</sup> Maria José Arana, “To Ransom the Feminine,” trans. Anita Howard, *Christianisme i Justicia* (Barcelona: CJ, 2004), 117: 3.

globally. This process has three dimensions: local, global and cosmic. It is very important to understand the integral perception of reality by perceiving the global nature of woman's oppression and liberation.

There are key moments in this global advance and, as Margaret Mead rightly pointed out, *feminism* is fundamental to the change. It is fully integrated into evolution and it implies a real transformation of humanity, of the totality, not only for women, but also for men.

On this depends in a big way the revival of the world; it is a consciousness which has already begun to emerge slowly and insistently, but the repercussions are yet to be foreseen and identified.

In the following paragraphs, the impact of feminism on various fields of human society has been discussed.

#### **4.1. Impact of Feminism and Recent Developments**

Feminist thinking has succeeded in drawing public attention to the inequality between women and men, and to the structures within the society which belittle and mitigate against women. It has led to a reconsideration of women's role in the workplace, resulting in moves towards equal pay and equal opportunities policies; and it has identified and tackled the problem of sexual harassment at work. Feminism has also succeeded in challenging perceptions of women's skills, with the result that some women are entering non-traditional areas of employment such as the construction industry.

Feminism has influenced culture, resulting in greater coverage of women's interests and concerns, particularly by the mass media. Feminist thinking has adapted and diversified to tackle new issues, including AIDS, homophobia (prejudice against homosexuals), technology, and warfare. Some feminists have combined feminist ideas with pacifist and environmentalist ideologies to condemn nuclear weapons and criticize new technologies. These include reproductive technologies and surrogate motherhood, which are regarded as a means by which men exert control over the earth's resources and over women's bodies.

##### **4.1.1. Impact in the West**

Feminism has effected many changes in Western society, including women's suffrage; broad employment for women at more equitable wages ("equal pay for equal work"); the right to initiate divorce proceedings; the right of women to control their own bodies and medical decisions, including obtaining birth control devices and safe abortions, etc. Some

feminists would argue that there is still much to be done on these fronts, while third-wave feminists would disagree and claim that the battle has basically “been won”. As Western society has become increasingly accepting of feminist principles, some of these are no longer seen as specifically feminist, because they have been adopted by all or most people. Some beliefs that were radical for their time are now mainstream political thought. Almost no one in Western societies today questions the right of women to vote, choose her own marital partner if any, or to own land, concepts that seemed quite strange only 100 years ago.

Feminists are often proponents of using non-sexist language, for example, using “Ms” to refer to both married and unmarried women, and the ironic use of the term “herstory” instead of “history”. Feminists are also often proponents of using gender-inclusive language, such as “humanity” instead of “mankind”, or “he or she” in place of “he” where the gender is unknown. Feminists in most cases advance their desired use of language either to promote an equal and respectful treatment of women or to affect the tone of political discourse. This can be seen as a move to change language which has been viewed by some feminists as imbued with sexism—providing for example the case in the English language the word for the general pronoun is “he” or “his” (The child should have his paper and pencils), which is the same as the masculine pronoun (The boy and his truck). These feminists purport that language directly affects perception of reality. However, to take a post-colonial analysis of this point, many languages other than English may not have such a gendered pronoun instance and thus changing language may not be as important to some feminists as others. Yet, English is becoming more and more universal, and the issue of language may be seen to be of growing importance.

#### **4.1.2. Impact on Education**

Opponents of feminism claim that women’s quest for external power, as opposed to the internal power to affect other people’s ethics and values, has left a vacuum in the area of moral training, where women formerly held sway. Some feminists reply that the education, including the moral education, of children has never been, and should not be, seen as the exclusive responsibility of women. Paradoxically, it is also held by others that the moral education of children at home in the form of home-schooling is itself a women’s movement. Such arguments are entangled within the larger disagreements of the Culture Wars, as well as within feminist (and anti-feminist) ideas regarding custodianship of societal morals and

compassion. The mission of educating women, be it in the field of moral or secular, is taken seriously in the universities all over the world.<sup>41</sup>

#### **4.1.3. Impact on Heterosexual Relationships**

The feminist movements have certainly affected the nature of heterosexual relationships in societies influenced by feminism. While these effects have generally been seen as positive, there have been some negative consequences too.

In some of these relationships, there has been a change in the power relationship between men and women. In these circumstances, women and men have had to adapt to relatively new situations, sometimes causing confusions about role and identity. Women can now avail themselves more new opportunities, but some have suffered with the demands of trying to live up to the so-called “superwomen” identity, and have struggled to ‘have it all’, i.e. manage to happily balance a career and family. In response to the family issue, many socialist feminists blame on the lack of state-provided childcare facilities. Instead of the onus of childcare resting solely on the female, men have started to recognize their responsibilities to assist in managing family matters.

An article that marked a watershed in feminist thinking about sexuality was Adrienne Rich’s ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality’ which was first published in 1980. This article of Rich made an impact in the feminist community. She asserted that the very radicalism taken for granted by heterosexual feminists was in itself oppressive and demanding as the patriarchal assumptions that heterosexual women contested.<sup>42</sup> There have been changes also in attitudes towards sexual morality and behaviour with the onset of second wave feminism. Women are more in control of their body, and are able to experience sex with more freedom than was previously socially accepted for them. This sexual revolution that women were able to experience was seen as positive (especially by sex-positive feminists) as it enabled women and men to experience sex in a free and equal manner. However, some feminists felt that the results of the sexual revolution only were beneficial to men.

#### **4.1.4. Impact on Religion**

Feminism has had a great effect on many aspects of religion. In liberal branches of Protestant Christianity, women are now ordained as clergy, and in Reform, Conservative and

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<sup>41</sup> Miriam Schneir, ed., *The Vintage Book of Feminism* (London: Vintage, 1995), 198.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Evans, *Introducing Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc. 1997), 98-9.

Reconstructionist Judaism, women are now ordained as Rabbis and cantors. Within these Christian and Jewish groups, women have gradually become more nearly equal to men by obtaining positions of power; their perspectives are now sought out in developing new statements of belief. These trends, however, have been resisted within Islam and Roman Catholicism. All the mainstream denominations of Islam forbid Muslim women from being recognized as religious clergy and scholars in the same way that Muslim men are accepted. Liberal movements within Islam have nonetheless persisted in trying to bring about feminist reforms in Muslim societies. All the same, Roman Catholicism has historically excluded women from entering the main Church hierarchy and still does not allow women to hold any positions in the ladder of hierarchy as priests.

Feminism also has had an important role in creating new forms of religion. Neo-pagan religions tend to emphasize the importance of Goddess spirituality, and question what they regard as hostility of traditional religion to women and the *sacred feminine*. In particular, Dianic Wicca is a religion whose origins lie within radical feminism.

Imperceptibly perhaps feminist ideology has permeated every aspect of contemporary life and has brought in radical change, the way humans look upon and understand themselves. It basically touches the core of human identity.

## CHAPTER 5

### CRITICISMS ON FEMINISM

Feminism has attracted attention due to its impact in social change in the Western society. While feminism in some forms is generally accepted, dissenting voices do exist.

Some critics—both male and female—find that some feminists are effectively preaching hate against males or claiming male inferiority, citing that if the words “male” and “female” were replaced by “black” and “white” respectively in some feminist writings, the texts could be viewed as racist propaganda. While some feminists generally disagree with the view that men are equally oppressed under patriarchy, other feminists, especially the third-wave feminists agree that men are similarly oppressed and that gender equality means oppression of neither gender.

Some argue that because of feminism, males are beginning to be oppressed. Those who make this claim often note that males die from suicide four times more frequently than females. In the US, the rates climbed dramatically during the 1980s and early 1990s—more than 72% of all suicides are white males; slightly over half of all suicides are adult men, aged 25-65. Therefore, critics conclude that the US is becoming a country where males especially white males are severely been oppressed.

Many people object to the feminist movement as trying to destroy traditional gender roles. They say that men and women have many natural differences and that everyone benefits from recognizing those differences. The traditional nuclear family is now an exception in the US, and has been the subject of many critiques characterizing it as a racist or culturally ignorant or nostalgic idealized model.

Criticism has been made that social change and legal reform have gone too far and now negatively affect men and families with children. For example, it has been suggested that custody hearings in divorces are biased towards the mother, and several organizations have formed to fight for fathers' rights.

Some men also express worry that a belief that the number of women being promoted more than men for the purpose of public relations than for their merit is increasing. This could be compared to affirmative action; and feminists who favor such a method of reform

usually present arguments similar to those used for defending affirmative action (i.e. that such a system is required to offset the results of previous discrimination).

There is a group of people who argue that feminism has produced a fundamentally unworkable, self-destructive, stagnant society. They have noted that in societies in which feminism is strong, most women have below replacement rates of fertility.

Although efforts to curb sexual harassment against women in the workplace are normally applauded, there are those who note that the situation is such that the concern directed towards women in resolving disputes of sexual harassment is indirect discrimination, in that less concern is given to men when they are the victims of sexual harassment.

Post-colonial feminists criticize Western forms of feminism, notably radical feminism and its most basic assumption, universalisation of female experience. These feminists argue that their assumption is based on a white middle-class experience in which gender oppression is primary, and cannot apply to women for whom gender oppression may come second to racial or class oppression.

In recent years, feminist thinking has had to react against the concept of post-feminism, which argues that women have achieved full equality and that there is no need for further activism. Postmodernism way of thought has suggested that there is no one fixed way—with same universal values and norms all over—to understand the feminist movement has upset the traditional moral views and values. The concept of family as an institution is threatened in the West—single parenthood, gay and lesbian marriages are being encouraged in many societies.

## CONCLUSION

Feminism has traveled a long way from what was envisaged by Simone de Beauvoir. Contemporary feminists believe that women need not become 'like' men in order to achieve her true subjectivity. There are inherent differences between men and women which are not merely biological. Women are different from men and have different values, virtues and roles to play in the world. A woman's internal economy is different from that of a man. This does not mean that she is in any way inferior to man. The truth is that there is a feminine way of approaching reality, which is different from the masculine way.

Our human history is heavily biased in favor of the masculine. From the very beginning of history, women have suffered in the hands of men. She had to play the role of a mother, wife, and sister in ways that were acceptable to men. The man was the subject and the woman, the object. This is a perception that the inferiority of the female is the product of culture and history. The realization of this fact led to the feminist movements, movements for the equality of sexes, right to vote, equal pay, etc. As time went on, this feminist movement grew, yet fought against the patriarchal system and the separation of women which goes with it.

"Feminism: An Existential Perspective" has tried to touch upon some of the layers of feminism. This study has dealt with some issues with a special reference to Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism and Indian Feminism, which is popularly known as Indian Women's Movement. Indeed, the human world has changed its outlook towards women. Today we have reached a stage where equality of men and women is accepted as the norm and the feminine perspective on religion, morality, education, hetero-sexual relationships in gaining acceptance. This mutual existence between man and woman must continue to move forward, whatever be the circumstances.

Today, feminism cannot be considered an ideology that was born at a particular time of the human history, but rather it was identified and recognized at a particular point. Feminism is a united venture which cannot be done individually and alone. It calls us to an arduous and community apprenticeship which all of us, men and women, must serve. It is a shared task for which much understanding, courage, patience, listening, wisdom and definitely much love is needed.

In the male-dominated world, where men are considered to be superior to women, the feminist movements have broken the framework. They have helped women to shatter the

shackles, to raise their voices against the oppressive culture, tradition, and society. Of course, the path that the movement has walked through has not been smooth, but rather rough, and stormy. Positively, these movements have succeeded in awakening a sense of feminism in the world today.

To be authentically human, men and women should accept and acknowledge the unique contributions that both the sexes can make. The contributions are complementary. Women are neither better nor worse than men, but they are different, and from there both must contribute to the enrichment of the world and of humanity. In order to obtain a sustained human development, it is essential that there be transformed relationships, based on equality between men and women.

The feminist movement is an ongoing and continuous process. There is no end to this mission. The goal of feminists can be achieved only when men and women realize that they can make this world a better place to dwell in. Feminism of today marches into this heaven of freedom where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls of division, exploitation, domination, over the other. That is the dream of feminism, the desire of a true human society, of a true human world.

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