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Evolving Paradigms of Feminism: From Equality to Equilibrium

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the multifaceted evolution of feminism, tracing its historical roots, philosophical underpinnings, and contemporary manifestations. Beginning with an examination of feminism's origins in diverse cultural contexts, the paper delves into its historical trajectories, including the first, second, and third waves of feminist movements. Through a comparative analysis of liberal, socialist, and radical feminist ideologies, it elucidates the varied approaches to achieving gender equality and dismantling patriarchal structures.

The paper also investigates the inter sectionality of feminism, acknowledging the unique experiences and challenges faced by women of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It highlights the contributions of prominent feminist scholars and activists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Anita Hill, in shaping intersectional feminist discourse and advocating for inclusive feminist agendas.

Furthermore, the paper addresses contemporary debates within the feminist movement, including critiques of post feminism and concerns about the misuse of legislation intended to protect women. It explores the tensions between promoting gender equality and addressing the perceived marginalization of men, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balanced approach to feminist advocacy.

Drawing on historical analysis, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence, this paper offers insights into the complexities of feminist thought and its implications for achieving social justice and equality. It concludes with reflections on the ongoing challenges and opportunities facing the feminist movement in the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive society.

Keywords: *feminist trends, Misuse of Legislation, Gender Stereotypes, Historical Evolution.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism, a profound belief in gender equality, has evolved into diverse trends and movements globally. It goes beyond Western origins, advocating for social, economic, and political parity worldwide. The essence of feminism lies in acknowledging and respecting the

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varied experiences of women while striving to empower all to attain their inherent rights. It seeks to dismantle gender-based barriers, fostering equal life opportunities for women and girls, and all without undermining femininity or promoting any gender's superiority.

History reveals women's confinement to domestic roles and the denial of basic rights. Feminism addresses these issues through various trends. Liberal Feminism, prevalent in the United States and the Western world, focuses on legal changes to ensure equality, emphasizing women's presence in positions previously occupied by men.

Socialist Feminism, aligned with Marxist ideas, connects women's oppression to broader societal structures. It critiques unequal standing in workplaces and the domestic sphere, viewing women's exploitation as integral to a patriarchal system. This perspective calls for collective societal change rather than individual solutions.

Radical Feminism, sharing similarities with socialist feminism, asserts that society is inherently patriarchal. It advocates for profound social transformation on all levels, challenging existing power structures. Some radical feminists even support separatism, believing in the necessity of separate institutions for men and women until true equality is achieved.

Indian feminism reflects the heterogeneity of experiences, acknowledging multiple patriarchies and diverse feminisms. It emphasizes an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation, with actions aimed at challenging and dismantling oppressive norms within families and society at large. In this essay, we will delve into these feminist trends, exploring their historical contexts, philosophical foundations, and contemporary relevance. By examining these diverse perspectives, we seek to understand the intricate tapestry of feminist thought, acknowledging its evolution over time and its adaptation to different cultural and historical realities. Through this exploration, we aim to foster a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of feminist movements and their impact on societal structures.

II. HISTORY OF FEMINISM

Feminism's histories are a journey through time and civilizations, all about advocating for gender equality and ensuring women's rights. It's influenced by how society, politics, and money interact. Feminism has grown into a powerful movement that challenges traditional rules and aims to empower women. Feminism began in India while it was under the control of other countries. Initially, men took the lead in addressing major societal challenges. On a worldwide basis, the focus has been on ensuring that women have equal legal rights as men.

In India:First Phase: 1850–1915²

The initial phase of feminism in colonial India was led by men, focusing on social issues such as sati (widow immolation), child marriage, and illiteracy. During this period, social reform movements, initiated by men, aimed at challenging discriminatory practices related to caste and gender. Women were considered subjects of social welfare rather than autonomous agents of change.

Second Phase: 1915–1947³

With the intensification of the struggle against colonial rule, Indian nationalism gained prominence. Mahatma Gandhi played a pivotal role in incorporating Indian women into the non-violent civil disobedience movement. Women's organizations like the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged, focusing on issues such as women's political participation, franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties.

Globally⁴:

Ancient World to Enlightenment:

In the ancient world, organized protests against women's limited status were rare. The Renaissance saw figures like Christine de Pisan and Laura Cereta challenging prevailing attitudes towards women. The Enlightenment marked a turning point when women began demanding that reformist rhetoric about liberty, equality, and natural rights be applied to both sexes. Early feminists like Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft played pivotal roles in advocating for women's rights.

Suffrage Movement:

The late 19th century witnessed the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls (1848), leading to the formation of the suffrage movement. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 in the United Kingdom enabled women to join professions, sit on juries, and be awarded degrees. Organizations like the National Woman Suffrage Association advocated for women's right to vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted American women the right to vote.

² See Generally, *Feminism and Women Movement in India*- Dwijendra Nath Thakur

³ Ibid

⁴ Define feminism and history by Elinor Burkett and Laura Brunell

Post-Suffrage Era:

After achieving suffrage, the feminist movement faced challenges and fragmentation. In the United States, the National Woman's Party proposed an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to eliminate discrimination based on sex. Debates arose regarding the balance between equality and protective legislation for women. The movement experienced a slowdown during the Great Depression and World War II, with resurgence in the 1960s during the second wave of feminism.

III. THE SECOND PHASE OF FEMINISM: 1960S-1990

The women's movement of the 1960s and 70s, often referred to as the "second wave"⁵ of feminism, witnessed a notable departure from the idyllic portrayal of suburban life. Stemming from the frustrations of educated mothers, this wave gained momentum through discussions sparked by the civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam War⁶.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy⁷ established the President's Commission on the Status of Women, led by Eleanor Roosevelt. This initiative shed light on issues such as employment discrimination, unequal pay, and inadequate support for working women. Early victories included the enactment of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, aiming to combat gender-based discrimination.

The women's rights movement expanded with mainstream groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW) advocating for legal equity. Simultaneously, various ad hoc groups addressed a range of issues, from challenging college curricula to promoting gender-neutral language. The establishment of health collectives, rape crisis centers, and women's studies departments reflected the movement's diverse focus.

Radical feminists like Kate Millett⁸ and Shulamith Firestone⁹ engaged in theoretical discussions, scrutinizing the roots of women's oppression and critiquing traditional power structures. Concurrently, cultural or "difference" feminism celebrated the unique qualities associated with women.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The Vietnam War, spanning from 1954 to 1975, was a prolonged conflict between the communist North Vietnam, and then on-communist South Vietnam, backed by the United States. Referred to as the "American War" in Vietnam.

⁷ 35th U.S. President

⁸ Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* made the best-seller list in 1970

⁹ Shulamith Firestone, co-founder of the New York Radical Feminists, argued in her 1970 book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, that love perpetuated women's disadvantage, as it created intimate ties with men who were also their oppressors.

However, feminism became a confluence of competing ideologies. Anarcho-feminists called for dismantling traditional institutions, while individualist feminists broke with others on government intervention. "Amazon feminists" emphasized physical strength, and separatist feminists, including many lesbians, advocated for a period of separation from men.

Despite ideological differences, three major streams emerged. Liberal feminism aimed at concrete institutional changes, radical feminism sought a revolutionary restructuring of society, and cultural feminism embraced the celebration of distinct feminine equalities.

The second wave also grappled with racial disparities within the movement. White feminists' focus on gender-based oppression sometimes conflicted with the experiences of Black women, who faced both racism and sexism. Bridging this gap required acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by women of color. As far back as Sojourner Truth¹⁰, Black feminists had seen white feminists as incapable of understanding their concerns.

Internationally, by the late 20th century, feminism reached a global scale, interacting with movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, clashes arose between Western feminists and those from less-developed nations, revealing cultural differences and sometimes misaligned priorities.

The closing decades of the 20th century witnessed a mix of progress and setbacks. While feminism influenced diverse aspects of life worldwide, questions about the movement's uniformity, internal dissension, and global effectiveness persisted. The issues confronting women globally highlighted the need for nuanced approaches, recognizing unique economic, political, and cultural situations.

In conjunction with the second wave, pivotal legal moments significantly impacted women's rights. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade*¹¹ case, a landmark abortion rights decision, marked a triumph as the Supreme Court acknowledged a woman's fundamental right to choose abortion, protecting her decision under the constitutional right to privacy. In 1965, *Griswold v. Connecticut*¹² established a "right to privacy," allowing individuals to make personal decisions about matters such as child bearing. Internationally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted in 1979¹³, signaling a commitment to gender equality. In 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada, in *R. v. Morgentaler*¹⁴, declared the

¹⁰ Sojourner Truth- American evangelist and social reformer

¹¹ *Roe v. Wade* 410 U.S. 113 (1973)

¹² *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965)

¹³ Adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women

¹⁴ *R. v. Morgentaler*, [1993] 3S.C.R.463

existing abortion law unconstitutional, removing criminal regulation and granting women greater autonomy in their reproductive choices.

IV. THE THIRD WAVE OF FEMINISM: 1990s-2000s¹⁵

The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s as a response to the achievements and perceived limitations of the earlier feminist movements. Led by Generation X, this wave aimed to address the diverse challenges faced by women, considering factors like race, class, and gender identity.

Two significant events marked the beginning of the third wave. The 1991 Anita Hill hearings¹⁶, where she testified against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas for sexual harassment, gained national feminist support. Rebecca Walker, daughter of second-wave icon Alice Walker, coined the term "The Third Wave" during these hearings. Additionally, the 1990s saw the rise of underground feminist punk rock bands in Riot Grrrl¹⁷ groups, blending punk culture with feminism and politics.

Feminist scholars in this wave introduced new literature, with Kimberlé Crenshaw's¹⁸ concept of "inter sectionality" being pivotal. This idea highlighted how different identities intersect to shape one's experiences, leading to the formation of "intersectional feminism." The Anita Hill hearings revealed issues of race and gender, with Clarence Thomas claiming a "high tech lynching." African American feminists responded by raising funds for an ad in the New York Times, expressing outrage at the racist and sexist treatment of Hill.

The Year of The Woman followed, marked by increased female representation in Congress after feminists questioned the male-dominated leadership. EMILY's List¹⁹, a women's political network, played a key role in supporting pro-choice Democratic women.

Simultaneously, the Riot Grrrl movement emerged among punk rock musicians, addressing sexism, patriarchy, and other social issues. Bands like Bikini Kill and Brat mobile used music and publications to empower women. The Guerrilla Girls²⁰, active since 1985, targeted sexism and racism in the art world, utilizing anonymity and provocative art. Despite media misrepresentation, Riot Grrrls inspired global activism. The movement's influence extended into the early 2000s, fostering chapters worldwide.

¹⁵ Feminism the third wave- by National Women's history museum- 2020

¹⁶ Anita Hill, a lawyer of U.S. Started a Conversation about Sexual Harassment

¹⁷ Movement originated in 1991, when a group of women from Olympia, Washington and Washington, D.C. held a meeting about sex is min their local punk scenes in the United States

¹⁸ American civil rights advocates

¹⁹ Early Money Is Like Yeast Early Money Is Like Yeast

²⁰ Formed in 1985- The Guerrilla Girls set the foundation for radical feminist revolt

As the third wave transitioned into the 21st century, it diversified into various interest groups focusing on issues like abortion, eating disorders, and sexual assault. The Anita Hill hearings and Riot Grrrl movement were instrumental in shaping this wave. Some argue that the third wave continues today, while others see the emergence of a fourth wave with new technology and social campaigns.

The third wave was characterized by a postmodernist approach, questioning and reclaiming societal constructs around gender. Women sought to redefine femininity, rejecting stereo types and embracing a gender continuum. They actively subverted sexist symbols, using irony and humor to convey their message. Institutions from the second wave provided a foundation, but the third wave embraced a more inclusive approach, particularly welcoming women of color. Icons like Madonna and themes of "Girl Power" in popular culture reflected the redefinition of women as assertive and powerful.

The Internet played a crucial role in the third wave, facilitating the dissemination of ideas through e-zines, blogs, and online platforms. This democratization of content allowed for greater inclusivity and diversity within the feminist movement.

However, controversies arose, with some declaring the movement post feminist or questioning the significance of issues raised by the third wave. Debates around sexualized behavior sparked discussions on whether certain expressions of sexuality represented liberation or disguised old oppressions. Despite internal and external criticisms, the third wave's strength lay in its diversity and multivocality. Members argued that unified agenda was unrealistic and undesirable, emphasizing the importance of embracing a variety of perspectives and experiences within feminism.

V. IS FEMINISM STILL ABOUT EQUALITY?

Feminism attempted to abolish the patriarchal ideology that is deeply embedded in society. It is about elevating women's standing to parity with men's. It is about questioning the status quo and ending women's oppression. However, as time passes, that flow breaks someplace, resulting in what is known as the fourth wave. Even if women are sometimes considered as objects or as inferior to men, some feminists have gone too far, reversing the situation and making life difficult for males. Men are feeling the pressure from unfair legislation, phony legal cases, and privileges reserved for women.

In one opinion article²¹, the author writes, "Modern feminism has veered from gender equality

²¹ See generally, Today's feminism movement has devolved into men hating- TheTelescope

into a cult of outrage that seeks to belittle men." Later, the author explains what feminism is about: While the classic concept of feminism emphasizes gender equality, it has always come from a female standpoint. When women were battling for basic human rights, it was reasonable that feminists harbored great one-sided antagonism. They were unable to express themselves as freely as males and were forced to engage in extreme acts of public disobedience." "Everyone has various privileges, and in order to achieve equality, we must struggle to remove these privileges and create opportunities for all. Women should have equal opportunity to enter any career path, and men should have the same resources to seek out when in an abusive relationship or after being sexually assaulted."

Some critics believe that India has anti-men laws in place to protect women²². Rape²³ is a non-bailable, gender-specific offense under the Indian penal code. This means that a guy or boy can be arrested if a girl files a rape allegation against him without first investigating the facts. In addition, two out of every ten cases are false.

The Dowry Prevention Law (Section 498A/406 of the IPC) is one of India's most often misused legal regulations, and no changes appear to have been made over time. This section was intended to defend a woman's dignity, but it has become a weapon that they frequently use to harass and blackmail their spouse and his family. Once a FIR is filed under 498A/406 (IPC), it becomes a tool in the hands of the police to harass the husband and all of his family included in the FIR, with no inherent value or preliminary inquiry. This provision substantially decreases the couple's prospects of reconciling peacefully. The extended proceedings aggravate an already difficult relationship between the families²⁴.

According to a poll performed by the Fight against Misuse of Dowry Law²⁵, 98% of Section 498A cases are fake. The Supreme Court has changed its decision to guarantee that Section 498A is not misused²⁶. The Supreme Court directed that the district legal services authorities form one or more family welfare committees in each district, with a minimum of three members. Every complaint received by the police or magistrate under Section 498A will be referred to be investigated by such a committee. Until the committee's report is received, no arrests should be made.

There's also the issue where some feminists dislike "girlish" things. I experienced it personally when someone referred to my phone cover as "girlish." But that's a major issue. First, feminism

²² The gender advantage: Women who misuse it & men who bears it -Reader's blog

²³ 375. Rape. -A man is said to commit "rape"

²⁴ See generally, How Women Misuse Their Rights- Legal Service India

²⁵ Survey by 498A.org

²⁶ Changes Its 2017 Judgment In 2018- Rajesh Sharma case

began with the fundamental belief that women should be seen. Later, it was about women having equal rights and opportunities as males, not about becoming traditional guys with a colorless wardrobe. Feminism is the belief that women are neither inferior nor weaker than males. It's about embracing and respecting women's decisions. If a woman wants to work without marrying or having children, that is fine; feminism welcomes that. However, if she wants to stay at home and raise children that are also wonderful. Feminists did not fight to avoid becoming a housewife; rather, they want males to acknowledge that working at home is equally demanding.

Although men's rights are now included in laws intended to protect women, such as cruelty and domestic violence, our state institutions still lack separate legislation addressing violence and crime against males. Men are expected to be courageous in the face of any hard situation. If a man discusses any instances of sexual harassment that he has experienced, he is mocked and ridiculed. Rapes, which are horrible crimes committed against men, are completely ignored by courts and the judiciary. A guy is detained if he is accused with rape without even considering the facts, but if a woman commits such a crime, no one takes notice. Pseudo-feminism exists in our society, in which feminists try to elevate women while demeaning males.

The term "feminism" refers to equality for both genders, rather than a preference for one over another. Any accusation of harassment or violence against women must be investigated thoroughly by the police and supported by credible evidence and facts. Any woman who is seen abusing her rights must be punished by the law; otherwise, males in our society would lose faith in the legal system.

VI. CONCLUSION

Finally, in the two and three waves of feminism there has been a major shift from its focus on dismantling patriarchal norms to promoting gender equality. However, as time has progressed, concerns have emerged about certain factions within modern feminism veering towards a negative trajectory, displaying tendencies that appear to be little men rather than promoting genuine equality. While the historical context highlights the necessity for strong, one-sided activism during times of profound gender inequality, the contemporary feminist landscape has shifted. Some critics argue that elements of the movement have strayed from the core principle of equality, with claims of reverse discrimination and oppressive measures against men gaining attention.

In order to deal with this issue globally, particular emphasis has been put on cases of misuse

of legislation and unfair legal provision in India. Concerns are raised about laws that, while originally intended to protect women, are now being misappropriated and contributing to the perceived oppression of men. An ongoing challenge remains the delicate balance that legal frameworks need to strike between addressing genuine grievances and enabling misuse.

The essence of feminism, which initially sought recognition and equal opportunities for women, now faces a dilemma as it encounters situations where embracing traditionally feminine roles and choices is met with skepticism.

The need for true equality continues to be essential in this complex landscape. The term "feminism" itself embodies the idea of equality for all genders, emphasizing a departure from favoring one gender over another. A key step forward is to strike a balance between legal frameworks, to challenge stereotypes and to foster an environment in which individuals are free to make decisions without being judged. The focus must continue to be on real equality, acknowledging the complexities of today's problems while remaining true to the movement's underlying principles as feminism continues to evolve.

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