

The Significance of Gender Polarization in theory of Feminism: A Critical Overview

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Abstract- The concept of Feminism, Gender and Sexuality have become an important theme in literature. Feminism gained more importance in the twentieth century and ever since many writers have written about it. We can define feminism as, a movement striving for bringing out change in society, by making women equal to their masculine counter part in all the public and private spheres, be it social, economical or political. After feminism comes the studies of gender. Gender studies became an academic field of study in the 1960's. It focuses on the ways genders are identified, sexually oriented and shaped. The latest study that emerged from the above is Gender Polarization. It is a concept which was first countered by Sandra Bem. According to Bem gender polarization is a principle which is very well organised upon which our society is built and has been running, holding this basic institution. The present paper aims at how the study of gender polarization is significant and how it has affected our society, especially women.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender studies, Gender Polarization etc.

INTRODUCTION

Christine de Pizan authored *The Book of the City of Ladies* during the 15th century, to bring forth prejudices against women and their constant struggle to combat them. It was a beginning of the new body of literature. This was a new utterance in the history of literature that supported and defended the feminist voice or the civil, political, economic, and social welfare rights of women. Shortly after Christine Pizan, many writers started following the tradition of feminist writing which promulgated a reevaluation of historic contributions of women in society and also created scholarly interest in the lives of women voicing the significant concerns and ideas of women

emancipation in the contemporary era. This scholarship can be mentioned as feminism and literature has gained a lot from a feminist perspective. The theories of feminism have developed gradually and with every evolving era, critical views on feminism are coming up opening new spheres for women's understanding and creating a connection between the lives of women and the greater population of the world. It must be mentioned that feminism in a particular sphere of time, has surpassed talking about just women's interests and had delved deeper into the crevice of time to talk about various other social issues like gender polarization and the search for sexual identity. As defined by the Marriam Webster dictionary, "Feminism is an organization for equality on behalf of the rights and interests of women" (Dictionary, 2020). Feminist theories had contributed to a large spectrum of literature and historic writing, reverberating the existing masculine supremacy and creating narratives for unspoken words and muffled voices of women within the domestic and public spectrum.

Feminism is the advocacy of the rights of women. Feminism incorporated a position that society had been prioritizing the masculine point of view and that women are treated unjustly in society. Feminism makes efforts to change this system of the superiority of the male and fight against the gender stereotypes existing in society. The feminist movement has been campaigning for women's rights including the right to vote, equality of pay and property, equal work rights, and the right to receive education; among many others as maternity and marriage equality as well. It has been believed that there is no single leader in the feminist movement. There have been

numerous feminist movements, however, the first wave of liberal feminism which created a framework for the future feminist movements, started in the early 19th century when leaders like Emmeline Pankhurst, who travelled constantly giving speeches throughout Britain proclaiming the equality of women in society (Purvis, 2020). Apart from economic and social rights, the feminist movement has also proclaimed marriage and reproductive rights for women where mentioning that women are not machines of reproduction or tools for carnal pleasure after marriage. The central ideologies of feminism believe that the world has been experiencing male domination for a long time. Feminist philosophies dream of creating a world where everybody would have a chance to live, irrespective of their sex.

Therefore, it can be perceived that feminism is a social, economic and political belief that proposes and propagates the equality of sexes and is manifested worldwide. Praxis of Feminism began in the West by various organizations which work on the rights of women and their interests. In the past, in the western tradition, women were only allowed to be housewives and were not allowed to do jobs outside the house, rather men were allowed to do different types of jobs outside. In Europe, women were not allowed to own any type of property, they were not allowed to study, as well as they were not allowed to participate in any kind of public gatherings. Some campaigns were launched by some groups named National Organization for Women (NOW) which stated that there should be equality between men and women (Brunell, 2019). The early literature where criticism of feminism was projected were chronicles, critical writing, or narratives where male writers degraded the treatment of the female characters. Some of the famous writings which initiated the concept of feminism are *Thinking About Women* by Marry Ellman in the year 1968, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in the year 1969, *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer in the year 1970, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949). The work of Elaine Showalter *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979) created a separate and autonomous literary theory model by rejecting existing theories governed by male, and proposed a structure with feminine literary works. She said, "to analyze female literature, new

models based on women's experiences should be developed" (Johnson, 2020). Julia Kristeva, the famous Bulgarian writer had mentioned "to understand the problems and world of women, they must be referred to as women" (Jardine, 2020). These theories proposed by philosophers, writers, and thinkers indicate to different paths to the same goal: understanding the world of women as it is and not through some male dominated lens.

Therefore, it can be apprehended that the evolution of feminism is not just some change in literary writing but is an answer to the social requirement of equal rights for women and men. The widespread interest in realizing the rights of women gradually came up in a society with the evolution of Science and Technology and it was inevitable that literature would take up expressing the women's voice as a sacred duty. Over the years, several authors and thinkers had contributed to the theory of feminism by creating a broad spectrum of literature. The contributions of these people have enabled the theory of feminism to evolve and create new Pathways of understanding and Exploration.

It is very significant to understand and know about these people for understanding how the theory and idea of feminism had changed with the development and passing of time. The first person who must be named in this context is Mary Wollstonecraft. She was an English literary genius and a strong advocate of the theories of feminism. She strongly advocated for the reformation of the national education system. She mentioned that if education is not equally made available for men and women, society would not be able to proceed on its path. She had penned down her ideas in the famous literature *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (published in 1792).

Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first voices in the advocacy of education for women (Wollstonecraft, 2014). This was a very important step in the evolution of feminism. Her trailblazing work created arguments that if the education system does not allow girls, civilization shall cease to develop. She mentioned, "if women are allowed to study, then society shall get exceptional mothers, and wives who would have the capability of managing homes and also help society through their professional support" (Wollstonecraft, 2014, 22). A very significant question comes up in this discussion, what is the exact contribution of Mary during times when there

were other feminists? She was the first person who mentioned that the position of women in society can never change if they are not allowed to study or get the scope to proper education. She suggested a radical change is needed in the education system for the betterment of women in society.

The name that inevitably should come after Mary Wollstonecraft is Simone de Beauvoir. “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 2014, 14).

The quote is taken from one of the most iconic figures of feminism, Simone De Beauvoir. Researchers have been intrigued by asking this question, what shall be the right introduction for Simone? Is she a feminist? A socialist? The wife of Jean Paul Sartre? A thinker and writer? Or a social activist? Simone, however, is ready with the complete answer, “I am not a simple woman or a wife or a daughter, those all are roles which I play; I am a human being, and that is my chief identity” (de Beauvoir, 2014, 21). It does not require many definitions to talk about feminism and discuss the works and life of Simone. Although she is considered one of the chief pillars and founders of the modern feminist movement and her world-famous landmark text, ‘*The Second Sex*’ (in French *Le Deuxieme Sexe*), analyzed the role of “men considered unequal” women in society with 972 pages (Ellen, 2009). Before entering into the direct discussion of Simone, a famous quote from the author can be helpful in understanding: “on the day when it will be possible for women to love not in her weakness but her strength.... that day love will become for her. a source of life and not of mortal danger” (de Beauvoir, 2014, 102). It can be easily understood that no one before Simone de Beauvoir had viewed feminism in the light of living life for the woman. It was Simone de Beauvoir who first highlighted the importance of men's and women's equality rather than the superiority of women over men. Simone was in an environment of exceptional oratory power and she did not deem the women as superior to men but as equals. In the light of Simone, the discussion of feminism can get a new conjecture altogether. When the intellectuals of England started to read posthumously the Venetian feminist author Moderata Fonte, an idea of women's superiority in terms of intellectual progress and political power started to grow all around Europe which soon reached

the other parts of the world (Garrard, 2020). Gradually, issues surrounding feminism started to contribute to social change and demanded the hierarchical position of women in society. Movements like the Suffrage movement and Women's Trade Union League had thrown much light on the Civic contribution of feminist awareness and leaders like Alice Paul and Emma Goldman came up to voice the rights and responsibilities of women in society (Jacob, 2020). Emma Goldman raised her voice and mentioned that if women demanded the price of equality, then when would they abstain from protecting them and how can the women create another society for themselves to gain equality and respond to their needs? This theory raised many philosophical and psychological disputes in the United States of America and all across Europe.

As Simone de Beauvoir had been able to address the liberal, extremist and mainstream feminism through the emphasis on concrete and pragmatic thoughts at the governmental and institutional level, Kate Millett had been able to integrate women more thoroughly into a philosophical understanding and inequality in society. She was the person who can create a bridge between liberal feminism and radical feminism to restructure society and institutions, along with influencing the psychology of women in society. Kate Millett was the most famous American feminist writer who mentioned the reasons why the sexual health of women must be taken special care of because they are the ones who hold the society. She had mentioned,

“Patriarchy, reformed or unreformed, is patriarchy still: its worst abuses purged or forsworn, it might be more stable and secure than before” (Millett, 2016, 28). This quote, taken from her iconic book *Sexual Politics* condemns the patriarchal practices dominant in society and aims at building a better world for women. She repeatedly mentioned throughout her writings that if the feminine gender is not given enough significance as equal to the masculine, then the world shall never reach the point of betterment.

Truly speaking *Sexual Politics* (1968) and *The Second Sex* (1949), are two important doctrines propagating theories and ideas of feminism. *The Second Sex*, the iconic text by Simone defines women as they have been pointed out by Aristotle as recreation who lacks various qualities and by

Thomas Aquinas as imperfect man and incidental being. Simone throws light on the equality of women in society and propagates ideas that had inspired the French women's Liberation movement. However, a common question that is aroused by researchers and Scholars all around the world is why did Simone deny to call herself a feminist?

The reason for this question can be sought out from her writings: “man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female” (de Beauvoir, 2014,85). Simone populates the thought of the complete human being and not only a feminine gender and this was the new thought that she inspired feminism with. The life of Simone has been marked by incidents and happenings which make her an inspiration to the populace of modern times. She never saw feminism as an occupation of the women but as an important consideration of society because according to her, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their points of view which they confuse with absolute truth” (de Beauvoir, 2014,196). Similarly, Millett inspired cultural aspect of feminist theories and tried to inspire the women of the world to try and seek justification of their existence. As mentioned by her, “men and women are not to separate beings but the same identity in different circumstances coming face to face seeking freedom and emancipation in this life full of adventure, risk and promise” (de Beauvoir, 2014,24).

Virginia Woolf provides a direct narrative about the struggles and oppression of women from gaining recognition. Virginia Woolf is one of the most prominent English writers of the 20th century and is deemed as one of the strongest voices advocating for feminism in English society. Woolf gives several instances of the obstacles and oppression faced by women and their lack of freedom (Woolf, 2017). She claims that the intellectual ability of women of the Elizabethan era had been vehemently suppressed by patriarchal and racist societies. She elaborates on the legacy of gynocritics for talking ill about women in public.

What Millett sets as a faint remark and indication of oppression of women by men, Virginia Woolf gives detailed information about how women are dominated greatly by patriarchal societies and Supremacy (Woolf, 2017). The contrast is not in the content but the form of both narratives. While one

talks of an elderly woman of 1960 and mentions that the women have positively taken the obstacle and hindrance. The discussions between Virginia Woolf and Millett have been directed toward the lack of emancipation of women in society.

The next name is Mary Ellman who must be remembered after the discussion of Mary Wollstonecraft to Virginia Woolf as it is deemed that Ellman is a summation of the ideas propagated by all these writers and thinkers on feminism down the era. Mary Ellmann figures out the differences and dynamic deviation between male and female gender. He had fought the argumentative battle that women always dreamed of being a mother or a servant for the masculine gender. Mary Ellmann mentions, “women might have it tougher than men but how the family is described and the role of women in a family is dictated, she is nothing more than an entity for serving the family” (Cameron, 2019,81). It is in this respect of description that Paul directly connects to the responses and complaints made by Millet, Beauvoir, and Wollstonecraft. Paul directly mentions that women are very content working in the family, and did not understand how the man exploits them with dominance (Elen, 2019). The hindrances in the psychological stages of development of women are never brought to light because the woman accepts the exploits and obstacles they face in the family and this is continuing from the Elizabethan period and before. Kate Millet, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Virginia Woolf complain about the mentalities of a woman to accept the oppression she receives. Mary Ellmann suggests this dynamic point of view and the developments in the psychological stage of a woman by mentioning that they always had accepted the way they are treated in family and society.

Gender Polarization has come up as an answer to feminist theories and understanding throughout the world. Gender polarisation was first countered by Sandra Bem, who was an American psychologist. According to Sandra Bem, “the definition of femininity and masculinity is different because they are polar opposite genders, and behaviors acceptable for a man are not seen to be appropriate for a woman” (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022,52). The theory of gender polarization can be also viewed as an extension of gender discrimination in society. Sex is a biological reference between the distinction of man

and woman. Gender is a cultural concept that describes socially structured attitudes, activities, and behaviors appropriated by society to men and women. As Sandra Ben mentions, "When the physical differences between men and women are exaggerated culturally then gender polarization comes into action and one gender tends to overpower the other" (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022,53). It is important to identify gender polarization to understand the position and role of different genders in society. Bem says that sexual differences are exaggerated and the gap is further widened in order to grant more apparent identities to the existing sexual attributes, such as separate hairstyles for men and women etc. Some of the very common instances of discriminating against women from social actions can indicate the activity of gender polarization. Literature of the world has tried to talk about gender polarization in different aspects of life.

Genders are polarized right from childhood. We can see this polarization when girls are given dolls to play instead of cars, pink colour is preferred for girls and blue for boys girls and boys have different hair styles, household duties for women and outdoor duties assigned for men etc. These differences are exaggerated by society and there becomes a permanent mark of demarcation between men and women.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that gender polarization has been present in the thought process of society from the very beginning of civilization. That is why there was always a segmentation between the works and behaviors of men and women. Their social codes are different too. The complications occur when one of them tries to break the barrier. Society does not properly accept such things. On the other hand, being too obsessed with polarization can be the reason for the complexities. Hence In this paper, theory of feminism and how gender polarization is significant in this theory are discussed thoroughly to give a brief idea to the readers.

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