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From Waves to Intersections: The Evolution, Imperatives and Internal Debates of Modern Feminism

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a critical analysis of the evolution of feminist theory which argues that its evolution towards an intersectional framework provides the feminist movement both strength and poses the most significant challenge to the feminist movement. Employing the qualitative research method through a historical and descriptive analysis, the paper examines how feminism has transformed throughout the waves, focussed on universal legal and political rights, into an intersectional movement across gender, class, race and sexuality. The paper analyses key texts from liberal, socialist, radical and post-colonial traditions and key issues in feminist thought. The findings uphold that intersectionality is key to an inclusive feminist critique, resolving historical exclusions by centering marginalized voices. However, the research puts forth that such complexity generates profound tensions which challenges the movement's unity and leads to internal debates. It is the ability to resolve such inherent tensions which will provide for the future sustenance and relevance of the 21st century feminist movement.

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1.0 Introduction

Feminism is one of the most transformative and long-lasting socio-political movements of the contemporary era. Feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. However, there are many different kinds of feminism. Feminists disagree about what sexism consists in, and what exactly ought to be done about it; they disagree about what it means to be a woman or a man and what social and political implications gender has or should have. It challenges the structures of patriarchy and advocates for gender equality in every arena. It has evolved from securing basic legal and political rights such as voting rights to interrogating the complex intersection of gender, caste, race and sexuality. Nonetheless, motivated by the quest for social justice, feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, and political phenomena. Important topics for feminist theory and politics include: the body, class and work, disability, the family, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism, reproduction, science, the self, sex work, and sexuality. This study holds the position that feminism's strength and relevance in present times stems from its ability to evolve into an intersectional framework.

However, this intersectionality presents significant challenges to its unity and practical application. The research objectives of this study are to thoroughly understand what feminism stands for, both in its normative and descriptive dimensions and in practice. Another objective is to trace the emergence of feminism by studying its historical context and differentiate the various types and waves of feminism and the socio-political conditions that precipitated each shift. Also, this study will critically examine the key themes in feminist thought like sex/gender distinction, patriarchy and public/private dichotomy. This research is a qualitative method which employs historical and discursive analysis which will trace the development of feminist thought from its distinct waves and critically engages texts from liberal, radical, socialist and post-colonial tradition. Various themes in feminist thought like sex/gender distinction, patriarchy and public/private dichotomy will be analysed. A critical analysis by highlighting the lack of consensus in feminist thought will be done towards the end.

1.1 Historical Context of the Feminist Movement

The term 'feminism' has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term

'feminism' to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices.

In the mid-1800's the term 'feminism' was used to refer to "the qualities of females", and it was not until after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term *féministe*, was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Some feminists trace the origins of the term "feminism" in English as rooted in the movement in Europe and the US beginning with the mobilization for suffrage during the late 19th and early 20th century and refer to this movement as "First Wave" feminism. Those who employ this history often depict feminism as waning between the two world wars, to be "revived" in the late 1960's and early 1970's as what they label "Second Wave" feminism. More recently, transformations of feminism in the past decade have been referred to as "Third Wave" feminism.

However, other feminist scholars object to identifying feminism with these particular moments of political activism, on the grounds that doing so eclipses the fact that there has been resistance to male domination that should be considered "feminist" throughout history and across cultures: i.e., feminism is not confined to a few (White) women in the West over the past century or so. Moreover, even considering only relatively recent efforts to resist male domination in Europe and the US, the emphasis on "First" and "Second" Wave feminism ignores the ongoing resistance to male domination between the 1920's and 1960's and the resistance outside mainstream politics, particularly by women of color and working class women.

One might seek to solve these problems by emphasizing the political ideas that the term was apparently coined to capture, viz., and the commitment to women's equal rights. This acknowledges that commitment to and advocacy for women's rights has not been confined to the Women's Liberation Movement in the West. But this too raises controversy, for it frames feminism within a broadly Liberal approach to political and economic life. Although most feminists would probably agree that there is some sense of "rights" on which achieving equal rights for women is a necessary condition for feminism to succeed, most would also argue that this would not be sufficient. This is because women's oppression under male domination rarely if ever consists solely in depriving women of political and legal "rights", but also extends into the structure of our society and the content of our culture, and permeates our consciousness (e.g., Bartky 1990).

1.2 Normative and Descriptive Components of Feminism

In many of its forms, feminism seems to involve at least two claims, one normative and the other descriptive. The normative claim concerns how women ought (or ought not) to be viewed and treated and draws on a background conception of justice or broad moral position; the descriptive claim concerns how women are, as a matter of fact, viewed and treated, alleging that they are not being treated in accordance with the standards of justice or morality invoked in the normative claim. Together the two claims provide reasons for working to change the way things are; hence, feminism is not just an intellectual but also a political movement.

So, for example, a Liberal approach of the kind already mentioned might define feminism (rather simplistically here) in terms of two claims:

- i) (Normative) Men and women are entitled to equal rights and respect.
- ii) (Descriptive) Women are currently disadvantaged with respect to rights and respect, compared with men.

On this account, that women and men ought to have equal rights and respect is the normative claim; and that women are denied equal rights and respect functions here as the descriptive claim. Disagreements within feminism can occur with respect to either the descriptive or normative claim, e.g., feminists differ on what would count as justice or injustice for women (what counts as "equality," "oppression," "disadvantage"?), and what sorts of injustice women in fact suffer (what aspects of women's current situation are harmful or unjust?). Disagreements between feminists and non-feminists can also occur with respect to both the normative and descriptive claims, e.g., some non-feminists agree with feminists on the ways women ought to be viewed and treated, but don't see any problem with the way things currently are. Others disagree about the background moral or political views.

In an effort to suggest a schematic account of feminism, Susan James characterizes feminism as follows:

Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program. (James 2000, 576)

James seems here to be using the notions of "oppression" and "disadvantage" as placeholders for more substantive accounts of injustice (both normative and descriptive) over which feminists disagree.

Some might prefer to define feminism in terms of a normative claim alone: feminists are those who believe that women are entitled to equal rights, or equal respect, or... (fill in the blank with one's preferred account of injustice), and one is not required to believe that women are currently being treated unjustly. However, if we were to adopt this terminological convention, it would be harder to identify some of the interesting sources of disagreement both with and within feminism, and the term 'feminism' would lose much of its potential to unite those whose concerns and commitments extend beyond their moral beliefs to their social interpretations and political affiliations. Feminists are not simply those who are committed in principle to justice for women; feminists take themselves to have reasons to bring about social change on women's behalf.

1.3 Evolution of the Feminist Movement-Waves and Traditions

According to Maggi Humm and Rebecca Alter, The history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first-wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity during the 19th century and the early 20th century in Britain and USA. It focused on *de jure* (officially mandated) inequalities, Particularly on gaining the right of women's suffrage. Wollstonecraft is regarded as the grandmother of British feminism and her ideas shape the thinking of the suffragettes. The suffragettes campaigned for the women's report, which was eventually granted to some women in 1918 and to all in 1928.

The second-wave feminism is generally identified with the period beginning in the early 1960s. Second wave feminism has existed continuously since then, and continues to coexist with what some people call third-wave feminism. The movement encouraged to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicised and reflective of us exist structure of power. While the first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality such as the end to discrimination and oppression.

The third-wave feminism challenged or avoided the second wave's "essentialist" definitions of femininity which according to the third wave feminism is often assumed a universal female identity and associated it with the experiences of upper middle class white women. Third wave feminist theory usually encompassed coloured women consciousness, post-colonial theory, critical theory, Charles-nationalism, eco-feminism, queer theory and new feminist theory. The third wave was concerned with issues of race, class and sexuality, women in the workplace, sexual harassment and unfair maternity leave policies, sexual assault and rape, respect for working mothers, etc.

Over a century of feminist thought and politics in different parts of the world has produced a rich body of work. However, this outline does not capture the complexities of the debates within feminism, although it is a useful entry point into feminist theory, as long as these distinctions are not understood to be watertight compartments.

1. Liberal feminism was most popular in the 1950s and 1960s when many civil rights movements were taking place. The dominant view of Liberal feminism is that all people are created equal by God and deserve equal rights. This type of feminism believes that oppression exist because of the way in which men and women are socialised, which supports patriarchy and keeps men in positions of power despite women having the same mental capacity as their male counterparts. Liberal feminist believe women should be given the same opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Unfortunately, Liberal feminism has been known to only concentrate on the legal aspect in the fight against patriarchy. It has been criticised for not breaking down the deeper ideologies of society and patriarchy and for ignoring race and class issues.
2. Marxist feminism's foundation was laid by Frederick Engels in his analysis of gender oppression in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). He argued that a woman's subordination was not a result of her biological disposition but of social relations. In the present context, the capitalist class relationships are the root cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination. Men are socialised into exploitative relationships in relation to work and they carry their socialisation over into the home and their relationship with women. The result is the patriarchal relations that stem from man attempt to justify the economic expectation of women. Hence for Marxists, the solution to the emancipation of women as a class lies in the overthrow of the capitalist system of economic exploitation and creation of more equitable forms of society
3. Socialist feminism believes that there is a direct link between class structure and the oppression of women. Western society rewards working men because they produce tangible, tradable goods. On the other hand,

women's work in the domestic sphere is not valued by Western society because women do not produce tangible and shareable goods. This gives men power and control over women. They believe that the way to end this operation is to put an end to class and gender. Women must Work side-by-side with men in the political sphere. In contrast to the ideals of Liberal feminism which tends to focus on the individual woman, the socialist feminist theory focuses on the broader context of social relations in the community and include aspects of race, ethnicity and other differences.

4. Radical feminism claims that the root cause of subordination of women is the patriarchal organisation of society which is determined by a male or male order that enjoys economic and political power. It is a system of social relations in which men as a class have power over women as a class because women are sexually devalued radical feminist want to free both men and women from the rigid gender roles that society has imposed upon them. It is this sex-gender system that has created operation and radical feminist's mission is to overthrow the system by any possible means. Sometimes radical feminists believe that they must wage a war against men, patriarchy and the gender system which confine them to rigid social roles. Radical feminists are divided into two groups with very different views. The first group, i.e., the radical – libertarian feminist believe that femininity and the production limit women's capacity to contribute to society. Radical-libertarian feminists like to violate sexual norms and believe that women should control every aspect of their sexuality. They are strong promoters of abortion, contraceptives and other forms of birth control. The other group, the radical-cultural feminism believe that women should encompass their humidity because it is better than masculinity. Radical feminists see a link between sex-female subordination, porn rape and abuse and therefore these must be eliminated. Prominent radical feminists are Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon, while prominent cultural feminists are Alison M. Jaggar, Paula Rothenberg and Alice Echols.
5. Eco-feminists believe that patriarchy and male domination is harmful to women as well as the environment. Women need to use their superior insight to reveal how humans can live in harmony with each other and with nature.
6. Black feminism argues that sexism and racism are inextricable from one another. Black feminists argue that liberation of black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism in class oppression.

1.4 Key Issues in Feminist Thought

1.4.1 Sex/Gender Distinction

Sex is to Nature as Gender is to Culture one of the key contributions of feminist theory is the making of a distinction between "sex" and "gender". Sex as referring to the biological differences between men and women and gender as indicating the vast range of cultural meanings attached to that basic difference. This distinction is important for feminism to make because the subordination of women has been fundamentally justified on the grounds of the biological differences between men and women. This kind of biological determinism has been one of the most important legitimizing mechanisms of

women's oppression over the centuries. The challenge to biological determinism is therefore, crucial for feminist politics.

1.4.2 Different Forms of Patriarchy

Kate Millet, one of the earliest radical feminist to use the term in the 1970s, developed on sociologist Max Weber's conception of domination to argue that throughout history the relationship between the sexes has been one of domination and subordination, in which men have exercised domination in two forms—through social authority and economic force. The emphasis is on patriarchal system to establish that means power over women is not an individual phenomenon but is a part of a structure.

The historian Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as: "the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions "in society and that women are deprived of access to such power." This does not mean that every individual man is always in a dominant position and that every individual woman is always in a subordinate position. What it does mean is that under patriarchy there is an ideology that men are superior to women, that women are the property of men and that women should be under the control of men.

Patriarchy takes different forms in different geographical regions and different historical periods. For instance, as the historian Uma Chakravarty has pointed out, the experience of patriarchy is not the same among tribal women as among women in highly stratified caste society. It is not the same today as it was in the 19 century, and it is not the same in India as it is in the industrialised countries of the West. The term "patriarchies" is therefore found useful by feminist scholars to refer to this fluidity. By using this approach, the linkages of patriarchal structures with other institutions are made visible—with, for instance, class, caste, race, nation, and religion. For example, the socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein uses the term "capitalist patriarchy" to emphasise the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structures. Another such term is "brahminical patriarchy", which Uma Chakravarty uses to draw attention to the intersection of caste and gender oppression.

Apart from the control of women's sexuality under patriarchy through the strictly policed institution of monogamous marriage, women's labour power is also controlled by men. Women's productivity within the household and outside is controlled by men who will determine whether women will work outside the household or not. To maintain this control over women's exercise and labour, they are deprived of access to and ownership of productive resources, which makes them entirely dependent on men. Further, their mobility is limited through rules and norms that confine women within strictly defined spaces.

This sexual division of labour is not limited to the home, it extends even to the "public" arena of paid work, and again, this has nothing to do with "sex" (biology) and everything to do with "gender" (culture). Certain kinds of work are considered to be "women's work" and other kinds, men's, but more important is the fact that whatever work that women do get slower wages and is less valued. For example, nursing and teaching are predominantly female profession and also comparatively ill paid in relation to other white collar jobs which the middle classes take up. Feminist point out that this

"feminisation" of teaching and nursing is because such work is seen as an extension of nurturing work that women do within the home.

In other words, the present subordination of women arises, not from unchangeable biological differences, but from social and cultural values, ideologies and institutions that ensure the material and ideological subordination of women. Thus feminists view questions of sex- differentiated work, the sexual division of labour, and more fundamentally, questions of sexuality and reproduction, as issues to be extricated from the realm of "biology", which is understood to be natural and unchangeable. The feminist agenda is to relocate these issues in the realm of the political", which suggests that they can and must be transformed.

1.5 Feminist Critique of the Public-Private Dichotomy

In liberal theory, the distinction between "public" and "private" answers the question of the legitimate extent of the authority of the law. The public realm is understood in this context to be open to government regulation while the private realm is to be protected from such action—sexuality and family being understood to be private. In Marxist theory too, this distinction is central, although from a different point of view. Engels argued that women's oppression begins with the transformation of housework from a public to a private service. The "private" in this sense, is the arena of oppression and only when women emerge into the "public" sphere of production will they become truly emancipated. Since for Engels the motor force of history is provided by changes in the relations of production (defined, in the context of capitalism, as the relations between capital and labour), housework is not "work", women participate in history only to the extent that they emerge from the "private" and enter the industrial workforce.

Feminist scholarship emerging from both liberal and Marxist traditions have contested this distinction as being conceptually flawed and politically oppressive. From within the liberal tradition comes the argument that the dichotomy assumed between "public" (non-domestic) and "private" (domestic) has enabled the family to be excluded from the values of "justice" and "equality" which have animated liberal thought since the seventeenth century—beginnings of liberalism. The "individual" was the adult male head of the household, and thus his right to be free from the interference by the state or church included his rights over those in his control in the private realm—women, children, servants. Thus, oppression within the family was rendered invisible to political theory.

In addition to sharing this view, socialist-feminists critique the public/private distinction in Marxist theory produced by the model of political economy based on "production", defined as economic production for the capitalist market. This model, they argue, ignores the "private" sphere of "reproduction", where women are responsible for reproducing both humans (through child-bearing) and labour power (through housework.) For traditional marxists, this work is seen to be part of the non-economic or superstructural realm, and is not even defined as "work". Socialist feminists therefore, contest the public/private distinction by showing that sexuality, procreation, and housework, understood to be "private", in fact hold up the "public" sphere of production. Their argument is that housework is a commodity—it is unpaid labour that helps to reproduce labour power. This is so in two senses—a) when male labour comes home, it is the housework done by women that ensures that they can go back to work the

next day b) the bearing of children reproduces actual people who will work in factories etc. However, this work is not paid for, and this unpaid labour in the "private" sphere underlies and ensures capitalist production in the "public" sphere.

Thus, feminists across the political spectrum are agreed that the public and the private are not two distinct and separate spheres and that the assumption that they are, is uniformly detrimental to women's interests. However, there is no consensus on the consequences of this understanding for feminist practice. From one kind of feminist position, characteristic of US feminism, it is possible then to argue that many claims important to feminists, from reproductive rights to protection against sexual harassment, are most effectively grounded on the claims to privacy. In fact, the rhetoric of the individual's right to privacy has been used in the USA to secure some rights for women against the patriarchal family. For example, the landmark judgement on abortion in *Roe v. Wade* (1972) is based on the belief in the individual woman's right to privacy. So was the judgement in 1965 that the right of married couples to use contraceptives is part of "a right to privacy older than the Bill of Rights." Feminists who support privacy as a ground for securing rights for women, while challenging the traditional public-private dichotomy, make the argument that the virtues of privacy have not been available to women since they did not have the status of individuals in the public sphere. In this view therefore, the task of feminist practice is to transform the institutions and practices of gender so that a genuine sphere of privacy, free of governmental and legal intrusion, can be ensured for both men and women. This is not a position taken within the Indian women's movement.

More common here is the diametrically opposite stand arising from the radical feminist slogan "the personal is political" which has brought into the public arena issues such as domestic violence against women, child abuse and rape. Feminist pressure for legislation on these issues has meant the recognition that violence of various kinds against women in the "private" realm of the family and sexuality is in principle as actionable as violence in the "public" arena. The logical extension of this line of thinking is that privacy and family are areas of "judicial void" or "judicial weakness" to the extent that they are outside the application of the law. Thus issues arising from sexuality and family take on legal significance. Although adherents of this position do hold that the state is paternalistic and masculine, they are confident that if a law is designed by feminists from the standpoint of women, it can be of advantage to women. They denounce the right to privacy, therefore, as a means to protect the existing structures of power and access to resources in the private sphere. For example, it is argued that by sanctioning abortion as a right of privacy, the state has ensured that the control women won out of this legislation has gone to men within the family-husbands and fathers. Further, when abortion is framed as a right of privacy, the state has no obligation to provide public funding for abortion.

Thus, the feminist reconceptualization of the public-private dichotomy and the critique of the family as an oppressive institution opens up several new areas of debate.

Conclusion

In the West, today, most women have a degree of independence and range of choices costly drinking and off by that for mothers and a minority has reached elite positions. However, even here, these games are not enjoyed equally by all groups of women and major inequalities remain. In general,

women remain strikingly underrepresented in political elites and legislative bodies; they work much longer hours than men but received far less financial reward and are much more likely to live in poverty; their sexual and reproductive choices are still constrained. At a broader level, societies are still largely structured around the dichotomous conception of gender which imposes 'appropriate' identities, roles and behaviour, though the nature of such identities roles and behaviour varies within and between nations. The traditional view of women, as intellectually and socially inferior to men, continues to prevail in certain areas. However in rural parts of some less developed nations, for example, women have little or no personal Independence. Even in societies where women have been given brought your responsibilities and power, men have normally dominated political life. The emergence of classes, states and major religions has universally stringent male dominance and the rise of capitalism has further this tendency. Feminism today is widely perceived as being in crisis or decline. The certainty is, enthusiasm and political activism of earlier years has been replaced by apathy, in-fighting and defensiveness.

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