

Feminism and Social Identity

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Abstract:

Feminism broadly can be understood as a form of cultural critique that stems from the knowledge of deep-seated prejudice based on gender that underlie and govern all spheres of the social system. Emerging from nineteenth-century social reform movements such as abolitionism and civil rights activism, feminism gained momentum during the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The first wave of feminism focused on securing legal and political rights for women. The second wave identified gender hierarchy as the central source of oppression and emphasized sexual freedom and emancipation. The third wave broadened feminist perspectives by recognizing differences among women based on race, class, and ethnicity, while also questioning earlier feminist assumptions. Feminist theory evolves against this backdrop providing the direction and necessary theoretical foundation to the movement, while in turn getting shaped by it. Today, feminism is multidisciplinary and diverse, engaging with theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, eco-criticism, and postmodernism.

Key premises: Since its onset feminism has evolved and taken new directions, collaborating with other social theories and revising its own positions over time so much so that it no longer fits into a monolithic framework. Nevertheless, there are certain key premises, which are commonly agreed upon.

1. OPPOSITION TO PATRIARCHY

The term patriarchy has its roots in Greek *patria* meaning 'father' and *archè* meaning 'rule'. An anthropological term it refers to the sociological condition where men generally predominate in positions of power. Patriarchy refers to social systems where men dominate positions of power, placing women in subordinate roles across family, religion, politics, and economics. Feminists challenge patriarchy because it naturalizes inequality and legitimizes the domination and exploitation of women. Practices like honour killings exemplify how patriarchal values control women's autonomy under the guise of family honour. The killing is justified in the name of safeguarding the honour of the family.

2. SEX VERSUS GENDER

The distinction between sex and gender is fundamental to feminist politics. Sex is biological, referring to the physiological condition whereas gender is a social construct. Gendering is a cultural process whereby biological functions are attributed with social meanings. Reproduction is a biological function but society invests it with certain meanings. Most blatant fallacies upheld by society are: a woman achieves fulfillment *only* with motherhood and every woman by nature is caring and nurturing. Such erroneous notions trigger a process of gendering. Thus a woman who cannot conceive is made to feel that she is imperfect and flawed. Gender attributes certain qualities to male and female under which women are supposed to be feminine (timid, dependent, sacrificial) whereas men are supposed to be masculine (strong, rational, protective). Under such a construction women are often positioned as the 'other'— inferior and

subordinate to men. Patriarchy thrives by naturalizing these unequal gender relations known as biological determinism.

3. OBJECTIFICATION AND COMMODIFICATION

Objectification can be defined as the practice of seeing or treating another person, usually a woman, as an object. Commodification of the woman often leads to her objectification. Women in media TV ads, popular novels, music video, fashion etc are often commodified, where she is reduced to a sexual thing or object displayed for the man to look at and relish. Think about the 'item number' in Bollywood cinema where the 'item girl' donning revealing outfits, dances to a large male audience. Objectification is an insult to the person as the individual is often reduced to an instrument or tool, which lacks agency. Such objectification contributes to gender violence, eating disorders, and unrealistic beauty standards, reinforcing unequal power relations.

4. CULTURAL STEREOTYPING

Stereotypes are notions or images that are standardized and fixed by convention. They are widely held, oversimplified generalizations about a particular group, community, individual or object that does not necessarily have a factual basis. To assume that women are passive and submissive, and men, active and aggressive is an instance of gender stereotype. Stereotypes of any kind, be it of race, class, caste, gender or ethnicity, can be dangerous as it can lead to discrimination or unfair treatment. Feminists are critical of gender stereotypes as they serve to reinforce the unequal nature of gender relations by portraying women in a negative or inferior position to that of men, thereby reinforcing patriarchy. Gender stereotypes portray women as passive and men as aggressive, shaping career choices and social roles. Media, literature, and film play major roles in sustaining these images, making them central sites for feminist critique.

5. LANGUAGE AND GENDER

The feminist's take on language is that it is essentially male centered. Some of the earliest research on the links between language and gender were based on 'difference and dominance'. It investigated the patterns of communication, issues relating to dynamics of power, politicized categories and classifications, which serve to situate social relations and identities. Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980) argued that men construct language. For instance the word 'man' is often used to refer to human species in general plus God is always referred to as 'he'. Women within language are often sidelined or stereotyped. Terms referring to female counterparts in binaries like master/mistress, bachelor/spinster etc. are not used congruently and often carry negative connotations. Ecofeminists point out how women are often animalized through words like 'bitch', 'old hen', 'chick', 'vixen' etc. used in casual conversations.

Psychoanalysis argues that gender identity is formed with the acquisition of language, which marks the transition of the child from the Imaginary (realm of the Mother) to Symbolic order (realm of Father). Since language acquisition is concomitant with internalizing of patriarchal ideology, feminists often consider language as **phallogentric**. Within the poststructuralist-feminist framework language came to be regarded as a site of cultural construction of identity. Identity/ Subject, it argued is not static or fixed unlike what traditional feminists believed, but it is a discursive construction. Lacan says subject is a process implying that it is constantly produced and hence changeable through verbal interactions (speech and writing). Individuals take up gender positions as they enact practices within discourse.

MAJOR FEMINIST APPROACHES:

1. Black Feminism

Feminism of colour, which includes Black feminism, Chicana feminism, Asian feminism and Native feminism, examines women's subordination by situating it along the racial axis. It sets itself apart from the mainstream feminist movement by launching a severe attack on the latter which they see as essentially led by the middle-class, white women who are blind to the oppression based on race, caste and ethnicity. Black feminism, a significant subtype under this, grew as a sociopolitical movement in the US out of severe discontent with both the Civil Rights Movement and mainstream Feminist Movement of the 1970s. While the Civil Rights Movement primarily focused on the oppression faced by black men at the hands of white, feminists focused solely on the problems faced by the white woman. For example, earning the power to work outside of the home was not an accomplishment for the black feminists as they have been working all along. Since racial prejudices are sourced in cultural artifacts, black feminists examine the representation of black women in media and films, which is dominated by the white male perspective. Black women in these representations are usually pitted against the European white women.

For example, black women are often presented as sexually aggressive and huge as opposed to controlled, less rebellious, petite white women. They are often presented in the roles of servants or Maamies, (in films like *Gone with the Wind*, *Colour Purple* or the animation series *Tom & Jerry*)

2. Psychoanalytic Feminism:

Psychoanalysis states that our conscious self (subjectivity) is not innate but formed through our relations with the others in society. This is of great significance to feminism as it gives them a means to negotiate biological determinism. Psychoanalytic feminism seeks to understand the process of gendering by exploring the workings of the human subconscious. They were especially critical of Freud, who in his theory of psychosexual development defined women as suffering from a lack, as she discovers her castrated state (lack of penis) during her early stage of sexual development, and develops a **penis envy**, a constant sense of inferiority and incompleteness. As opposed to the boy who resolves his oedipal crisis (i.e. discovery of penis and difference from mother) by identifying with his father, the girl child is unable to do so fully as a result of which her position is rendered ambivalent and fluid. She is denied a matured sexuality and is considered deprived (incomplete man) by nature. Further, the unsuccessful resolution makes her more vulnerable to psychosis, thus presenting femininity in a negative light. Despite its misogynist hue, psychoanalytic feminist have appropriated some of Freud's notions, especially his linking of the unconscious with sexuality. Freud states that infantile sexuality is inseparable from subject's identity, but this sexuality, psychoanalytic feminists claim, is not a result of biology but due to the association that the child develops with the outside world (here the mother and the father). Going by this, the 'lack' that woman suffers from is not necessarily that of the male organ but the lack of power that it represents. Thus one may be born male or female but the cultural environment in which one is placed determines one's masculinity or femininity.

3. Postmodern Feminism

It refers to the third wave of feminism that evolved in the 1990s under the influence of poststructuralism and deconstruction. This is described as the 'cultural' turn in feminism marked by the shift from "things" such as women's labor and male violence to "words" focusing on issues of language, representation and subjectivity. Judith Butler was the prime exponent of this mode. She rejected the essentialist generalizations about gender and the tendency to view gender as a fixed binary. Instead she argued that categories of 'male' and 'female' can be defined only in relation to each other and they are based on

performance. This performance is social, as it has to be enacted, validated and accepted by society. The performative aspect is crucial to feminist agenda as it gives scope for negotiation, conflict and contestation of gender roles. Further its meaning is dependent on location, time and cultural framework within which it is performed and since it has to be performed continuously the meaning of gender categories cannot be fixed for all time.

4. Cyberfeminism

Internet or cyberspace has figured prominently within feminist debate—a subject actively contested, and negotiated. There are three fundamental feminist approaches to reading this space. First is one in which Internet is seen as a ‘technical’ realm and hence associated with masculinity. This is partly due to the perception that women are slow or do not access the internet. Second, it is seen as a ‘feminine’ medium that provides a counter public space where women can come together, interact, create solidarity and participate in networking, let alone have access to knowledge which was traditionally denied to her. The third approach, and this is of special concern to Cyberfeminism, perceives the Internet as a ‘bodiless space’ where assumed gender binaries break down and are made irrelevant. Under this mode, cyberspace embodies a utopian world beyond the constraining gender boundaries. The possibility of bodiless communication allows for ‘gender swapping’ thus creating opportunities for creating new gender identities. Cyberfeminism intervenes in identity politics, monolithic conceptions and exclusive categories—problems of inclusion and exclusion within feminist and gender discourse. Thus the theory is anti-essentialist.

5. Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that argues that historically, there is an inherent link between domination of women and that of nature. In western society women are often treated as inferior to men, nature is treated as inferior to culture and humans are considered as superior to nature. Nature is often portrayed as feminine. Expressions like “Mother Earth”, “virgin forests”, “rape of nature” testify to this and women are thought to be closer to nature than man. One reason for this is the physiological connection between childbirth and care. Linking the menstrual cycle to the lunar cycle also underscores the idea of women being in tune with nature. Focusing on these connections ecofeminism analyses how nature and women are culturally devalued and oppressed.

CONCLUSION

Feminism, as this discussion demonstrates, is not a single, unified doctrine but a dynamic and continually evolving framework for understanding power, identity, and social relations. From its early struggles against legal and political exclusion to its contemporary engagements with language, representation, technology, ecology, and intersectionality, feminism has persistently challenged the structures that naturalize inequality. By interrogating patriarchy, gender construction, objectification, stereotyping, and symbolic systems such as language, feminist theory exposes how identities are culturally produced and hierarchically organized. The emergence of diverse approaches—Black feminism, psychoanalytic, postmodern, cyberfeminism, and ecofeminism—further underscores the importance of recognizing difference and complexity within women’s experiences. Together, these perspectives shift feminism beyond essentialist notions of womanhood toward a more inclusive, anti-hierarchical understanding of social identity. Ultimately, feminism remains a critical cultural practice that not only seeks gender justice but also reimagines subjectivity itself, opening spaces for resistance, transformation, and more equitable futures.

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