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FEMINISM – THE ILLUSION OF EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT The Emergence of Feminism in the 19th Century heralded a new era to realize the suppressed potential of women and raise a voice against patriarchy, domination, gender discrimination. Women who for years together learned to adapt themselves to male domination resolved to fight against this and became more communicative and assertive. In the due course of time 'Feminism' became a worldwide revolution and pioneers like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan, Kate Millette dealt with several women's issues in their writings and awakened woman's consciousness. Thus with the growth of Feminism women's power came to forte and the empowered women claimed their rightful place on par with men.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

It is a universally acknowledged truth that women who are physically and mentally equipped to perform on par with men have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, but are also deprived of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, thoughts, sufferings. As Sushila Singh puts it "Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right, but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life"[1]. Woman's first and major limitation is that she is physically weak and mostly becomes man's dependent. Moreover all the values reflected in art, literature, religion and culture are prescribed by men but not by women. So she is pushed to the periphery and man remains at the centre. She has been deprived of freedom and denied the right to live as per her will and wish and these views are supported by laws of Manu such as "Na stree swathantra marhathi".

RISE OF FEMINISM

Women constitute roughly half of the world's population, but they have been denied full justice, social, political and economic equality. Thus an awareness of women's rights and a movement to fight for the social, political and economic rights of women was felt and a movement called 'Feminism' has emerged. The term 'Feminism' was first used by the 19th century French Dramatist Alexander Dumas and the movement has cut across national boundaries.

The credit for giving a start to the feminist movement goes to pioneers like Simone de Beauvoir with her book *The Second Sex* published in 1948 and it is about the oppression of women. She says that today's so called inferiority of women is the product of centuries old discrimination. She feels that the realization of women's suppressed potential would be in the interest not only of women alone, but of entire humanity. The most important concept that Simone de Beauvoir has given to feminist criticism is the 'othering' of women. This has brought 'patriarchy' a system of domination, exploitation, sexual aggression into existence. Childlessness, not delivering a male child, widowhood are the heinous offences of women and beating, scoldings, taunts and anger are some of the ways used to control women.

Women for years together learned to adapt themselves to male domination by taking recourse to silence. The search for emotional security, compromise and conformity are other forms of reaction. Simone's *The Second Sex* is followed by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1903. She holds the view 'For a woman, like a man, the need for autonomy, self-realization, individuality are as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted"[2]. Friedan was convinced that marriage and motherhood keep happy even the most progressive idealistic women. But these alone do not give happiness and they have problems of identity. Friedan's book was followed by Kate Millette's *Sexual Politics* published in 1969. She argues that in the patriarchal society woman has been accorded a demeaning position and she explains the insecurities faced by women.

'Starting with desire' is evident in women's writing throughout the world. Women's writing will naturally be different from men's writings. "Women are basically the same as men, but have been conditioned to think and behave in different ways"[3]. Gayatri Spivak has said "Woman's voice is not one voice to be added to the orchestra, every voice is inhibited by the sexual differences"[4]. Nancy Chodorow, an American Psychologist, explains the differences on the psychological development of girls and boys. The idealization of men and the language used by mothers reflect masculine values, virtues and repress women. Hence a woman is always conscious of her dependence on a man according to Clandine Herrmann (1980).

In India people steeped in religious beliefs, superstitions, traditions do not get influenced by the Feminist movement. 'Manu' the law giver declared that women must be in the custody of father in the childhood, husband in her youth and sons in the old age. The Feminism though played little influence in the lives of the most of India, it gradually evolved over a period of time.

INDIAN FEMINISM

In ancient India the status and privileges enjoyed by women are of high order and the saying '*yathra naaryasthu poojyanthe thathra thishtanthi devathaa*' testifies this. Women in the Vedic period like Gargi, Maitreyi were highly enlightened and philosophical. We have empowered women like Sita, Satyabhama, Droupadi, Savithri and Sakunthala in our puranas who fought tooth and nail for their rights and rightful places. In the medieval period also women were given a position of respect and esteem. They were equally intellectual and were never discriminated against on the basis of gender. A woman who was once hailed as an embodiment of 'Shakti' in our country was relegated to the status of a secondary citizen by patriarchy, gender discrimination, oppression. As such there was a slow decadence in her position and this continued for several centuries. Various Historical and Sociological aspects seemed to have contributed their share in keeping the women behind the curtains. During pre-independence period woman's education was encouraged and supported by many great philosophers, thinkers and reformers. This heralded the freedom of woman from the chains of illiteracy, ignorance and her talent, thirst for knowledge, craving for recognition were awakened and her dominant potentialities were tapped and came to the forefront.

In the 1930s, the Progressive Writers Association awakened the middle class woman to her social responsibility. Women's associations played a significant role in changing women's consciousness. They fought against child-marriage, purdah and prohibition of widow re-marriage; called for educational and political rights. From Seventies, a new phase of woman's movement began. Till late Seventies, middle class feminists, scholars took up issues related to women and made significant contribution to what has come to be called as 'Women's Studies'. Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawar Jhabwala, Shasi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Anita Desai delineated in their writings women in flesh

and blood with a distinct mind of their own and with a strong desire to establish identity of their own.

For the last few decades there came a perceptible change in the attitudes of modern women and they find no sense in being an acquiescent, suffering and sacrificing lot. The new woman detests to be stifled under the oppressive restrictions. "Her education, her rights of citizenship and other legal rights and above all her gainful employment, economic independence have tremendously influenced her outlook on conjugal relationship and attitude towards marriage"[5].

Thus, the term Feminism incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and concepts. It is "a concept that can encompass both an ideology and a movement for socio-political change based on critical analysis of male privilege and woman's sub-ordination within any given society"[6]. So Feminism is viewed as a humanistic philosophy. In 1980s Feminism emerged as a "thought of system, a point of view to re-organize the world realities, a positive holistic approach to life, a step towards sanity in human relationships and perhaps the only mode for preservation of the very human existence on this planet"[7].

CONCLUSION

With increased literacy and greater awareness there emerged a 'New Woman' who is sandwitched between tradition and modernity, illusion and reality and the mask and the face. But she tried to create a physical as well as psychological space for herself. Modern woman is empowered because 'power' is woman's birth right and she should not expect some body to give it to her. Today she aims at deconstructing the patriarchal culture, customs, challenging the age old traditions and prejudices in male dominated society. So she can fight for a space of her own. "Sharada Act" is probably the first example of the successful fight of a woman to achieve property rights for girls in the family/parental property. Shah Bano is another shining example of peaceful fight who succeeded in protecting her rights to Alimony from her husband. The silent protest of a newly married woman in Rajasthan against open defecation and her denial to go to her husband's house swayed the entire nation. Similarly the resistance of women in Dubagunta a hamlet in Andhra Pradesh under the leadership of an audacious octogenarian Rosamma against the sanction of liquor shop by the Government sent tremors and forced the Government to shelve it. There are many more examples of empowered women who are fighting against discrimination, superstitions and inequalities.

Empowerment is not a boon or gift doled out by men and modern woman is no longer at the mercy of man. She has the ability to grab power and can empower herself socially, economically, politically, culturally. Empowerment is not an illusion, it is a reality and it is not a myth but a truth. This can be achieved with the right, rational thinking and support of her co-partner. May the sanity prevails in human thinking as preached by Sri Satya Sai that there is only one 'kulam' *i.e.*, 'Manavakulam' and only two Jathis *i.e.*, Male and Female whose togetherness is essential to perpetuate the mankind and its peaceful existence.

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