



GLOBALIZED FEMINISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY: AN ANALYSIS THROUGH GLORIA STEINEM'S WORKS

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KEYWORDS :

The West has been playing with the liberal idea of feminism ever since the era of 'The Enlightenment' in Europe. Women started getting freedom and rights since the middle of the 19th century and one would think that by the dawn of the 21st century, the problem of discrimination against women would be over; that feminism would no longer be an issue in the West of the 21st century.

A reading of the work of Gloria Steinem, the celebrated feminist and author of the U.S.A. tells a different story. It shows how feminism is still vibrant in the West and how it is also needed in the 21st century, though it has morphed into different avatars and has taken global dimensions. This paper discusses the form of feminism in the 21st century through the works of Gloria Steinem.

Born in 1934, along with being a feminist and an author Gloria Steinem is also known as a journalist, a social activist with political themes. She became famous as an American activist when she became the driver of the women's liberation movement in the heady decades of 60s and 70s. She is a prominent writer who has written many key works on feminism and the era of counterculture. She has stood for rebellion and non-traditional forms of identity.

Her views of feminism are radical and non-confirming, as is evident from her works and many of her famous quips. One of the most famous of her quotes showing her stridently feminist position is: "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle". Though some critics describe her as liberal, but she herself calls her a radical feminist as is evident from her views.

She was one of the first to stand up for abortion rights for women. Christianity considers abortion a sin, considering it murder and thus bans abortion as well as contraception. It is a harsh position the onus of bearing an unwanted child falls upon the woman and not the man. The man is just condemned in the after-life, but the woman has to bear the burden of single-handedly bringing up a child. The Bible considers the foetus to be a real human being and thus considers abortion a sin. Many verses in the Bible are taken to mean that they consider foetus as a human being:

"At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."¹

"Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."²

"I will say to God: ... "Your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?"³

The Church Father Tertullian also railed against abortion and since his writings became very influential in Christendom the idea that abortion is a sin became famous and was incorporated in the Christian canon law.

Gloria Steinem had an abortion when she was 22. She was much de-

ried by the society for it. It became a defining moment in her life which headed her onto the path of feminist. She herself admits that it was the moment when she became a feminist in the true sense.

"It [abortion] is supposed to make us a bad person. But I must say, I never felt that. I used to sit and try and figure out how old the child would be, trying to make myself feel guilty. But I never could! I think the person who said: 'Honey, if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament' was right. Speaking for myself, I knew it was the first time I had taken responsibility for my own life. I wasn't going to let things happen to me. I was going to direct my life, and therefore it felt positive. But still, I didn't tell anyone. Because I knew that out there it wasn't [positive]"⁴

Though in the U.S.A. and many countries in the West, women have complete freedom of abortion, but not satisfying her with national boundaries, Gloria has found her cause among the Third World countries where she gives visiting lectures to raise awareness about women's issues. India lately has become a favourite destination for her, making her cause truly global.

In 1979, Gloria started a campaign for the international practice of female genital mutilation. It was the point when her concerns became truly global, as female genital mutilation, at least forceful, is virtually unknown in the West. It is a norm in the Middle-Eastern Islamic countries and in many tribes in Africa and New Guinea. In a widely appreciated article 'The International Crime of Female Genital Mutilation', published in her 'Ms.' Magazine she called for an international fraternity against this barbaric practice. She considers even male genital mutilation as unethical and inhumane and calls for her brothers to stand up against it.

"These patriarchal controls limit men's sexuality too... That's why men are asked symbolically to submit the sexual part of themselves and their sons to patriarchal authority, which seems to be the origin of male circumcision, a practice that, even as advocates admit, is medically unnecessary 90% of the time. Speaking for myself, I stand with many brothers in eliminating that practice too."⁵

However, many of her fans as well as followers were baffled when she remained completely quiet over the atrocities that were inflicted upon women in the Middle-East when many terrorist organizations ordered genital mutilation of the subjects living under them.

Like any liberal thinker of the modern West, she supports same-sex marriage and transsexualism. In the 70s, when the support for homosexuality was rather low, her views were ambiguous; but in the recent times, she has expressed her unequivocal support for transsexuals.

Though she is a feminist and a prolific writer, she does not use abstractions and obscurantist phraseology in her books. She is against academic writing which glorifies incoherent writing. She thinks that knowledge which is not helpful is not knowledge at all.

Her work is a globalized form of feminism which has taken up global causes in many countries of the West, the former Communist Bloc and also in the Third World countries. Her campaigns cut across national boundaries and in the past decade she has focussed her energies on raising awareness about women's issues in the Third World countries.

The globalization of feminism was not achieved just through her social and feminist campaigns. Gloria Steinem is a renowned political

activist who has campaigned for political candidates representing certain political parties in the United States of America and she makes her views about other political parties in other countries well-known. This is what made feminism a global phenomenon.

This globalization of feminism started during the heady era of 60s and 70s, which was also the era of Hippie culture and the Vietnam War. Influenced by the Cold War politics, America's involvement in the Vietnam War was much criticized. Initially, Steinem was not very much against the Republican Party, but slowly she became a decided enemy of the Republicans and a supporter of the Democrats.

She started political campaigning in the 1964 elections when she had started showing sympathy for the liberal parties. But she became truly radical in her political commitments in the 2004 Presidential elections when she vehemently opposed the re-election of George W. Bush junior and made it the pre-requisite of a feminist to oppose centre-right and non-left parties across the world. In the 2008 Presidential elections too, she sided with the Democrats:

"Both Senators Clinton and Obama are civil rights advocates, feminists, environmentalists, and critics of the war in Iraq.... Both have resisted pandering to the right, something that sets them apart from any Republican candidate, including John McCain. Both have Washington and foreign policy experience; George W. Bush did not when he first ran for president."⁶

Her position as a decided enemy of War against Terrorism has made Feminism a global political phenomenon where activists have identified feminism with all the neo-left issues, including a vehement condemnation of Israel, an unequivocal support for Palestine, and a support of leftist politics around the world. The Leftist politics in the Middle-East has taken a position in which the majority Muslims are considered on the left, while the minority Christians and the Jews are considered on the right.

It is Gloria Steinem's political activism which has given feminism a political reputation in the international arena. Feminism is no longer just a fight for the rights of women. It is a political movement which takes sides; supports certain political parties, while vehemently opposing others. It has become the masthead of a counter-culture which lobbies for global issues, generally aligned on the left of the politics of any country.

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