



## Failed Goddesses of Feminism

### KEYWORDS

Feminism, Ideology, Womankind, Emancipation, Conflict

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**ABSTRACT** *The idea of feminism has always invited attention because of its appealing slogans and concepts that have thrown up a plethora of questions revolving around the multiple identities of women, which are actually a construct of many attributes. The individuality of women and their various roles have been the components of such multiple identities. However, behind the noisy debate of feminism, a crude reality debunks the tall claims of its believers. The chasm between their ideology and living has raised many eyebrows. The obscurity in relating their ideological to their experiential has been quite disconcerting. The void between who they are within a real world and how they purport outside, leads to fallacy of an ideology that cannot salvage its own believers.*

*This paper tries to put forth the same antithesis in the context of outpourings of a few famous feminists who have miserably failed in propounding and projecting an idea that could have solved many a problem of women rather than pushing them into a confusion that has insidious forms of impracticality and discrimination peddled by the 'promiscuous' liberal thought.*

### Introduction

The lack of creative response from observers and participants of women discourse has left many women bedevilled with a host of questions about the utility and efficacy of such discourse within a society where role of women is decided by the factors that are alien to the processes of any genuine emancipation. The perception about women as something to be framed by a context still exists, and so do various symbolic constructs related to the lives and actions of women.

In Anton Chekhov's famous play *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopahin, a young merchant, describes his life of hard work and success. Failing to convince Madam Ranevskaya to cut down the cherry orchard to save her estate, he goes on to buy it himself. He is the self-made man, who purchases the estate where his father and grandfather had been slaves. He seeks to replace the cherry orchard with summer cottages where coming generations will see a 'new life'. In elaborating his developmental vision, he reveals the image of a man that underlies and supports his activity—'At times when I can't go to sleep, I think: Lord thou gavest us unbounded fields and the widest horizons, and living in the midst of them we should indeed be giants.' At this point, Madame Ranevskaya interrupts him, saying—'You feel the need for giants. They are good only in fairy tales. Anywhere else, they only frighten us.' (Gilligan, 1982)

It is said that perceptions regarding life and world depend in part on the relative position of the observer. The Chekhov's play suggests that when the observer is a woman, perspective may differ. All of us see things from diverse angles and this is true of women in particular. Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view. As such, women define themselves in a context of human relationship and judge themselves in terms of the ability to care. That's why, woman's place in man's life has been that of a nourisher, caretaker, helpmate, and a weaver of relations on which she herself relies. But what, when a woman makes a mishmash of her observations and roughly tangles the relations which she has weaved with her fragile hopes. Then indeed, she proves to be a bad observer as well as a failed manager.

So failed the so-called goddess of feminism Simone de Beauvoir. Some years back, the publication of her personal letters to one Nelson Algren, raised a storm (Beauvoir, A Transatlan-

tic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren, 1998). Apparently, the demystification of a significant kind had taken place. The image of this woman who authored the gospel of feminism, *The Second Sex*, was all but tarnished. She sought sexual, economic and political freedom for women across culture, so much so that an entire canon was created, inspired by her perpetual harangue to accommodate anyone who wished to talk about the fashionable 'woman-question', something that was being talked about so openly for the first time by someone (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 2012). However, revelations in her letters about the unconventional relationship with Nelson Algren as well as Jean Paul Sartre (Hoare, 1993), eclipsed the 'halo' of the woman who fought vociferously for establishing the 'unassailable emancipation' of entire womankind. While ardent followers of her faith viewed the issue as a welcome humanization of their idol, her critics got a reason to malign her. The whole episode merited a closer look and a radical dissection. The moot point seemed the relevance or otherwise of an ideology whose creator faltered miserably. Above all, the brand of so-called feminism which she propounded, while being utterly helpless on personal front, brought to light the inherent fallacy of her ideals – that are unnatural and impracticable.

### Ideology

Feminism, *per se*, as a concept or theory, has always remained a poorly defined subject matter. There has been no common definition to relate the different realms it usually is understood to be all about. To quote, Alice Jardine, in her book, *Gynesis*, said that the word feminist 'poses some serious problems'. She went on to say that 'we would [n't] want to end up by demanding a definition of what feminism is and, therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire that epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least' (Jardine, 1985). Rosalind Delmar, in her paper, 'What Is Feminism?' referred to 'the impossibility of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism', because of the 'fragmentation of contemporary feminism' (Delmar, 1986). Rosemarie Tong said, in her book, *Feminist Thought*: 'even if this is not the time to decide, once and for all, what feminism is, it is probably the time to consider the possibility that its meanings are ever changing' (Tong, 1998). The editors of a journal called *Feminist Theory*, said in their first issue: 'we neither wish to impose any form of theoretical orthodoxy nor any single definition of what counts as feminist theory' (Griffin, 2000 April).

All this indicates that the 'meanings are ever changing' as observed by Tong and as such defining feminism would diminish that diversity, as per Jardine's comment that 'dictionary meanings are suffocating'.

And going by Delmar's reference to the 'fragmentation of contemporary feminism', feminism remains an idea without firm shape and detail. This very fact poses a serious question on the vitality of the 'ideology' named Feminism. The same has been reflected by Denise Thompson in a paper 'Who's afraid of defining feminism?' presented at the Australian Women's Studies Conference, Macquarie University. She writes, 'there are already a number of covert definitions around, including the main one, i.e. feminism is about women, women's equality or women's rights. I don't think this is adequate because it makes it look as though women are the problem, whereas I believe the problem is the system of male domination. A crucial aspect of that defining is going to involve saying what feminism is not, that is, of criticizing many things which have been said in the name of feminism, and sometimes being thoroughly intolerant of some of them' (Thompson)

### Conflict

An ideology that fails to rescue its originator, leaving its followers in wilderness, is too vivid a proof of its inefficacy. Simone de Beauvoir herself was the subject of a conflict that she sought to resolve through her cult, but ironically could not protect herself from—a problem that no flimsy theory in the world can address. She seemed to have had a parallel word of existence alongside her ideology: an existence that questions the ideology or worse still, the need to have it at all. It could be argued that Beauvoir's so-called feminism and her personal life were two separate worlds. The question that pops up is as to why Beauvoir didn't come out with this dilemma of hers during her life time. If nothing, such frankness would have certainly helped her followers resolve or at least be more comfortable with conflicts, which they were and are afraid to reveal in public.

Strewn by her conflicting sense of moral duty as a woman towards two men—Nelson Algren and Jean Paul Sartre—Beauvoir failed to balance her mental being with her emotional existence. More so for a woman whose entire life was dedicated to the idea of 'emancipation'! Somewhere down the line, she must have felt guilty of playing ideological histrionics not only with herself but ostensibly with her camp followers all over the world. A decade after the death of Beauvoir, her phoney idealism looks askance for an obituary amongst the colossal junkyard of isms, cults and ideological hallucinations and aberrations.

It's said that those who speak loud, most of the times they speak hollow. And their hollowness is exposed only when their own selves get involved. The fate of so-called feminists seems to be the same. Even as much do they waft in the breeze of 'liberalism' and long do they dance on the waves of 'emancipation,' they finally realize the inadequacies of a futile revolution that brutally dethrones women.

### Late realization

Likewise, Shobha De, representing Indian (*desi*) brand of Beauvoir, has also learned her 'failed lesson'. Being mother of six children, she quickly realized that her advocacy of a permissive society might boomerang on her. She decided to pontificate in *Speed Post*, her autobiographical book: 'abstinence rather than protection'. She implored her daughters to learn to cook and shop, and 'solemnly entrusts the well-being of the girls in future to her eldest son' (De, 1999). Shobha prescribing male domination! Sounds atypical. The 'sheet anchor' of Indian feminism turned the tables topsy-turvy. The feminists were just gushing their teeth!

Nevertheless, there are feminists and there are feminists. The 'Lib of Tasleema Nasreen' is literally a lib *in toto*. Out to promote adultery and fornication, she looks upon home-keeping and child rearing as the worst forms of slavery. Women must therefore 'revolt' and act like the 'heroine' of her novel *Shodh* (Nasrin, 2003). There is nothing latent or vague about the neo-hedonistic nature of her dirt-cheap feminine message. Her flagrant writings, inspired by nothing but her abnormal sexual behaviour, have left no doubt about the fact that she behaves the way she writes, and she writes the way she behaves. During the past decades, she has divorced and married many men. But then, marriage and divorce have very little meaning for her, for she not only upholds promiscuity in the name of 'Women's Lib' but practices it in letter and spirit with no regrets.

Perhaps in her case, it's not yet a complete failure. The confession is still to come. May be it is not long before her own children will grow-up to inherit the kind of Bangladesh, whose moral and social fibre she relentlessly tried to slow-poison and pollute by her pointless writings even when she stands expelled from the country. Surely, a god-damned situation for the 'goddess' like her or for that matter anybody of her ilk.

### Conclusion

Down the ages, all man-made isms and ideologies have been found lacking mostly because of dichotomy of thought and action of their pronouncers. The posterity cast a questionable look on these 'man-made thought-systems' once they came to know about personal lives of their creators. Also, being man-made, the likely chances of any ideology being cent percent true and righteous was impossible for no human being can ever design and create a working model for mankind or a group within it. It is same like asking a marvellous machine to point out its inherent lacunae and strengths to draw up an operational model for itself. Such a working model in spite of its great mechanical precision can never be fool-proof. No doubt, this job can only be performed best by the creator or architect of this machine.

Therefore, the mantra of salvation lies in a God-centric model in all systems of universe and this immutable fact is taken care of only by a divine code based on prophetic revelation. Man-centric philosophies are nothing but symptomatic treatment that can at best provide transitory relief. Not salvation.

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