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FROM THE SHACKLES OF BONDAGE TO DEFINING WOMANHOOD

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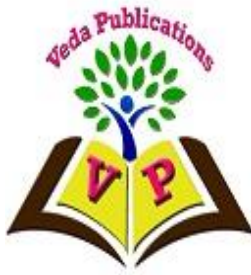
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ABSTRACT

“The Enemy is not men. The Enemy is the concept of patriarchy, the concept of patriarchy as the way to run the world or do things.”

There are many definitions of who a feminist is – the simplest and probably the best is what is listed in most dictionaries – “a person who believes in the full equality of women and men. “the goal of feminism is quality between men and women. Feminism is a “full idology” because it involves an entire restructuring or rethinking of much of what we have experienced in our lives.



Keywords: *Feminism, Black Women, Racism.*

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Until the 1940s, black women in both Anglo American literature had been usually assigned stereotyped roles. Their images had some dilemma or problem society could not resolve. During the same period, Afro- American literature moved in a different direction. While southern White Literature had focused on the mammy as the dominant black female image, black literature centered mainly on the image of the tragic mulatta. Such novels as **Clotel** (1850) by William Wells Brown and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), the first published novel by a black woman, set the stage for this heroine as a lasting image in a black literature for decades to come.

Times have changed; black women are no longer subjugated to any kind of oppression. They have liberated themselves from the shackles of bondage to prove that they exist and have created an identity as black women defining themselves. For centuries, black women have been called the "mule of the world" and "slave of a slave" and had the status of the wretched on the earth. The feminist consciousness had catapulted the female of the species into donning the mantle of responsibility in various walks of life, which hitherto was either forbidden or simply not accessible to her. All this is indicative of the changed agenda and priorities in America. Black women wanted to reclaim their humanity and the very important and essential, womanhood. Linda Brent has said:

"Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Super added to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."

The institution of slavery led to the breakdown in the black family. There were economic interests involved in the black women having as many offspring as she could bear. Sometimes, the black woman took the life of her own children rather than submitting them to the oppression of slavery. The black woman became the most exploited 'member' of the master's household. Uprooted from the native African culture and placed in a dominant white culture, African American women were very openly intimidated by racists. Black women have experiences of two different worlds. As Katie Genera Common had said:

All African American women share the common experience of being black women in two "contradictory" worlds simultaneously, one, white, privileged, and oppressive the other black, exploited and oppressed.

The history of mankind is the history of men. Evidently, man became the law maker, imposing authority on the woman, who followed the rules laid down by him. After antiquity, all over the world and in all cultures, women have been fighting to free themselves from male domination. Woman was considered as a sort of



underdeveloped human being who lacks the essential human qualities of individuality. Though living together under the same roof, a man's attitude towards women was no better than that of a second – class citizen. Sarah Grimke observes:

“Man has subjugated women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort: but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind.”

Black women had to accept racial polarity in the form of white supremacy and sexual polarity in the form of male dominance. The specific oppressions experienced by black women have historically debased their characters. The black women have been defined in dehumanizing terms, terms employed to attack her personal integrity and self-worth. Black women are stereotyped as sex objects and mere breeding instruments accused of emasculating black men. These myths have acted as modes of social control in degrading black women's character.

Since the whites defined 'achieving manhood' as the ability of a man to be sole economic provider of the family, many black females tended to regard the black male as a 'failed' man due to his inability to assume the

role of sole economic provider. In retaliation, black men considered white women as more feminine than black women. Both black men and women were uncertain about their manhood and womanhood. They both strived to attain the standards set by the dominant white society. After emancipation black men had a difficult time in obtaining employment as they were barred from many of the crafts they were trained for during slavery and hence the black woman had to work to sustain here family, but it did not make her more independent than the white woman. Rather, she became more subject to the brutal exploitation of capitalism, as black, as worker, as woman. Black women were exploited economically as a worker, used as a source of cheap labor because she was a female and even worse because she is black. Black woman's status was contrasted with the white women, white men and black men. Race prevented black women from achieving privileges associated with white womanhood. Gender restricted them from citizenship, a status that white men jealousy, preserved and black men fought to acquire.

Feminism strives to undo this titled and distorted image of woman whose cries for freedom and equality have gone, and still go, unheard in a patriarchal world. It concentrates on the definition of freedom, originality and creativity. It helped to build and express the idea of a female self and identity. As a critical tool,



feminism aims at providing a new awareness of the woman's role in the modern complex world. As Alice Jardine states "Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women." Feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalization of women. Feminism recognizes the inadequacy of male created ideologies and struggles for the spiritual, economic, social and racial quality of women, sexually colonized and subjugated. It is an expression of the mute and stifled female voice, which is denied equal freedom of self-expression.

In the mid 1800's the term 'feminism' was from the Latin word femina meaning 'woman' 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 feminism, was used regularly in English. It is a belief in and advocating equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Some feminists trace the origin of the term 'feminism' in English as rooted in the movement in Europe and the United States beginning with the mobilization for suffrage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This movement is referred to as "First Wave Feminism." In the late 1960s and early 1970s it was called "Second Wave Feminism", more recently, transformations of feminism in the past decade has been referred

to as "Third Wave Feminism." In the early stages, the first wave of feminism in the United States was interwoven with other reform movements, such as abolition and temperance, and initially closely involved women of the working classes. However, it was also supported by black women abolitionists, such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth and Frances E.W.Harper, who agitated for the rights of women of color.

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 of ought not to be treated and viewed and draws on a background conception of justice of 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. In an effort to suggest a schematic account of feminism, E. Porter defines feminism as "A perspective that seeks to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices women suffer because of their sex.'

One might characterize the goal of feminism to be ending, the ending of oppression of women. One must believe that in order to accomplish feminism's goals it is necessary to combat racism and economic exploitation. In other words, opposing oppression in its many



forms may be instrumental to, even a necessary means to, feminism. Feminism must exist apart from liberation struggle as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all forms. One must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice.

Some black feminists have argued that black women's experience of oppression based on race, gender and class leads them to resist race gender and class oppression. This idea simply fails to engage the diversity of black women's political views. For example, recent survey data suggests that about 35% of black community." Black women have a diversity of views on gender issues as well as on issues of race and class.

Black feminism can be expressed by a critique of black sexism or in a variety of other ways. Black feminists often address racism among white feminists and racialized sexism among white men. More expansive definitions include the expression of generally pro black woman viewpoints as evidence of black feminism. These different issues emerge as part of the black feminist focus on the interaction of

race, gender and class, and on the prioritizing of black women's experiences.

Black women realized that liberation is not working from nine to five every day. What is needed is action. They decided to wage an effective struggle and started believing that black women must speak for themselves to achieve real emancipation. They challenged the conventions and mores of their era to speak publicly against slavery and in support of their rights. They articulated their own experiences to make the public aware of the way in which racism and sexism together affected their social status. Black women were committed to uplift their race as a whole focusing their attention on changing the role of women in society. Black women challenged the dominant ideologies that defined womanhood as white female domesticity and restricted the status of white men. These women modified the definition of black women as free and independent citizens with success. Through their own agency and self-determination these black women pursued collective actions for social change, transforming society and themselves as a whole.

There was a First Wave Feminism, which refers to an extended period of feminist activity during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the nineteenth century the growth of the factory system and of capitalist agriculture brought a gradual change in the lives



of women. They gained economic independence which gave them confidence to fight for their legal rights. By the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage.

The world's first organized movement on behalf of women was officially inaugurated with The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, in the summer of 1848, in New York, under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The campaign waged by Stanton and her comrades met with belligerence and ridicule. By 1860, at a National Women's Rights' convention, it was agreed to acknowledge the right of American women to elective franchise. A final clause to the resolution was added by Lucretia Mott urging men and women to work for professional and vocational quality. During this period feminism formed international alliances. Women's legal and property rights were enlarged, new employment options opened and access to higher education improved.

One of the earliest manifestations of liberal first wave feminism in Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft's **A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)**, was written in the wake of the French Revolution and is still read as a seminal text. Virginia Woolf's **A Room of One's Own (1929)** and Simone De Beauvoir's **The Second Sex (1949)** are central to the canon as well. Woolf introduced the notion of female

bisexuality and a unique woman's voice and writing, Beauvoir the notion of women's radical otherness or, rather, the cognitive and social process of "othering" women as the second sex in patriarchal societies.

"The woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practicing various virtues, become the friend and not the humble dependent of her husband."
-Mary Wollstonecraft

Parallel to this strand of liberal first wave feminism, a socialist Marxist feminism developed in worker's unions in United States, in reformist social – democratic parties in Europe, and during the rise of communism in the former Soviet Union. It was initiated by, among others, Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, Alexandra Kollantai in Russia, and anarchist Emma Goldman in the United States. Liberal and socialist/ Marxist feminism shared a basis belief in equity and equal opportunities for women and men, but the latter focused particularly on working class women and their involvement in class struggle and socialist revolution. Socialist feminists such as Rosa Luxemburg and, in particular, Alexandra Kollantai and Emma Goldman, paved the way for second wave feminism, fighting both politically and in their own private lives for women's right to abortion, divorce and non-legislative partnership and against sexism both in bourgeois society and within the socialist movements.



Second wave feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s lasting through the late 1980s. The second wave was a continuation of the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the United Kingdom and United States. Second wave Feminism has continued to exist and it still coexists with what is termed Third Wave Feminism. The first wave focused on rights such as suffrage, whereas the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination. Second Wave Feminists was women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. The important feature of the Second Wave of Feminism was a shift from individual woman's discontent and protection against male domination to a collective political and social resistance to gender discrimination in all domains of society.

In the feminist criticism of the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanism of patriarchy, that is cultural mind set up has undermined women's sense of self-worth and made them believe that their inferiority is per-destined. Elaine Showalter described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from 'androtexs', books by men to 'Gyno Texts', books by women. She coined the term 'Gynotexs', meaning the study of gynotext

and gynocriticism, a criticism which concerned itself with developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women, it all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, and interpretation, and in all literary works. The concept of woman was given central importance in the formation of feminist theory. Feminist criticism has protested against micogyny and provided a great impetus for the endeavour.

In the European context, identity feminism took an apparently different direction with what is known as L'écriture articulated by authors Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva and introduced to United States by editors Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron in *New French Feminism* (1981). French feminists explored western universalism and its paradoxical articulation through dualisms such as mind/body, man/woman and white/black in their hierarchical ordering, in which one element is not only different from but also less than the other. Developing a thesis of the "Phallogocentrism" of western thinking, they argued that it constitutes the very foundation of western language through a binary logic that makes the phallus the master sign and the father the origin of symbolic law.

Second Wave Feminism is not one, but many. As expressed by feminist communication scholar Julia Wood (1994), the question may not be whether you are a feminist, but which kind of



feminist you are (P 106). The question is multiplied by the emergence of third-wave feminism. We can conclude that second wave feminism is highly theoretical and consequently has strong affiliation with the academy.

Third Wave feminists are motivated by the need to develop a feminist theory and politics that honour contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking. The third wave of feminism has been developing, often provoking lively debates about where feminism has been and where it is going. The concerns examined in this literature and the problems that are identified are linked to the second wave of western feminism associated with the 1970s and 1980s. Third wave feminist assessments of the state of feminism therefore aim to offer a corrective to established tenets, so that feminism may have greater resonance with women's lives today. It is now accepted that feminism itself is characterized by diversity and fragmentation.

Third wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what is deemed the second waves essentialist definitions of femininity, which over-emphasize the experience of upper middle class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Feminist leaders rooted in the third wave like Elaine Heng Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde, and many other Black feminists,

sought to negotiate a space with feminist thought for consideration of race-related subjectivities.

Toril Moi defines feminism, as a political position, while 'femaleness', is a matter of biology and femininity, a set of culturally determined characteristics. "The two words 'feminists' and 'feminism', says Mrs. Moi are political labels supporting the aims of women's movements of the 1960s." Seeking to distinguish between the feminists and the female, Toril Moi stresses that the former is characterized by political commitment to the struggle against all forms of male dominance and discriminations, which makes it something outside criticism itself. The term 'female' denotes writings by women, which do not necessarily mean feminist writings, because everything that is written by women does not concern an attitude against patriarchal formations.

The feminist's literary criticism of today can be considered as the product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. What is now popularly known, as the modern feminism movement is the worldwide awareness of the oppression of women and subsequent protest triggered by the early writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and others. This feminist consciousness is inevitably linked with the earlier women's movement. A woman's position is no longer to be merely that of the passive partner, and the practical organizer of the



household, her nature would allow her to uplift and to regenerate not only her own abilities, but also the spirit of her society.

A crucial beginning for the different orientation of the several feminisms lies in the differences between three major traditions. They are Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism and Marxist/ Socialist Feminism. It is said that liberal feminism is an individualistic form, concentrating on women having the ability to maintain their equality through being responsible for their own actions and choices. This idiom of the liberal feminist is that women will transform society. Through their own personal interactions with the opposite sex. Mary Wollstonecraft and J.S.Mill are considered liberal feminists. Wollstonecraft attacks educational restrictions and mistakes ideas that keep women in a state of ignorance and slavish dependence. According to Mill, the subjection of women was the production of an age – long custom. He believed that equality between the two sexes can be brought about by moral reforms, education and legal measures. In this approach the explanation for women's position in society is seen in terms of unequal rights or artificial barriers to women's participation in the public world, beyond the family and household. Liberal Feminism involves an emphasis upon reform of society rather than revolutionary change.

In short, feminism and blackfeminism originated and developed with the intention of liberating women from the systems and structures that have marginalized them, and with this intention it tries not only to interpret, but also to change the world along with all other factors an attitudinal change on both sides is very important in the uplift of women. It will result of new social order where women's dignity will be recognized and accepted.
