

## **PRECURSORS OF FEMINISM: A STUDY OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT & VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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### **Abstract**

The history of feminism is conjoined with the history of feminist movement. The feminist movement in west started with the publication of a vindication of the Rights of women by Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft challenged essentialist notions of femininity. Another important precursor in feminist criticism is Virginia Woolf. She emerged as a spokesman for women's cause in the early decades of the twentieth century.

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Feminism in West arose as a reaction against inhuman condition of women. Motherhood and homemaking were never considered as significant activities. It was believed that women live in an inert and passive world of their own. Men never recorded in history the contributions made by women and their sufferings. Whatever traces of feminine history are found cannot be relied upon as they are recorded by men and are based on their perspective. The history of feminism is conjoined with the history of feminist movement. The feminist movement in west started with the publication of a vindication of the Rights of women by Mary Wollstonecraft. She belongs to the Liberal feminist tradition. Other feminists who belong to this tradition are John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor. They believed that all social categories are structured by the fact of gender. They confirmed that 'femininity' is a prison and not a quality of healthy femaleness. Wollstonecraft argued that femininity is a condition similar to slavery. She says that the term 'human nature' seems to obliterate the social/biological difference between men and women but in fact it marginalizes female experience by characterizing men and women of quite different and conflicting 'natures'. According to her the liberal notion of reason did not extent to women and female nature is assumed irrational. Wollstonecraft refuted this claim of liberalism and asserted that women too possessed the innate capacity for reason. Women should be granted equal citizenship. She argues that in order to enhance women's capacity for rational thought education should be provided to them in which they lack. In a Vindication of the Rights of Women she asserts " Women are everywhere in this deplorable state; for, in order to preserve their innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed, truth is hidden from them, and they are made to assume an artificial character before their facilities have acquired any strength. Taught from their infancy that beauty is women's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its

gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour". (P-30 Whelehan)

Wollstonecraft challenged essentialist notions of femininity. She showed that man view women as ruled by the pull of their bodily functions. Women are regarded as mentally incapable. She asserted that if women are given education they can achieve full equality with men. She posits that the bare physical facts of biological difference should not be extended to create distinctions between the rational capacity of men & women. She charts the experience of middle class women trapped in four walls of the house and their ignorance. She expresses contempt for the liberal notion of a sanctified private sphere. She trespasses this sphere and shows how women are trapped into gendered socialization and are victims of man's oppression. She exposes basic contradictions within liberal thought that its moral principles of liberty, justice & equality cannot be applied equitably to all human beings. Certain institutions function as sites where hierarchies of privilege operate and private sphere is one such institute. She emphasizes that man's tyranny is responsible for women's enslaved State:

From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression. (P-31 Whelehan)

The liberal philosophy regards man as rational being. Man can transcend his animalistic, instinctual origins and can create a world of reason, culture & social order. Women are conceived as trapped inside their bodies. They behave like animals & they must be kept under restraint like animals. Wollstonecraft makes a plea for the rights of women so that they can discharge their social functions as wife, mother and moral guardian with more self-control. She subscribes to the view that properly educated women would be able to curb men's unbridled & corrupt sexual appetites. She envisions economically autonomous woman. Liberal feminists opposed the liberal thought which provided man the right to self-determination and which denied woman custody over themselves, their children or property & income. The heart of Wollstonecraft's feminism is a complex study of the impact of power relations on feminine psyche. Women are made the subalterns of men. No real love can be established between the two sexes until equality is restored between. The central message of Rights of Women is that women should deal with men 'as man to man' and there should be no sign of sexual self-consciousness or coquetry. In her novel Maria, Wollstonecraft portrays the sorry state of married women. Maria recalls in the lunatic asylum her state as wife: "a wife being as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing she can call her own. He may use any means to get at what the law considers as his... and the laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection or redress from oppressor..." (Taylor P-232)

In this novel Wollstonecraft explores the theoretical and material conditions that make women "slaves" in society. She questions the proper roles of wives, mothers & daughters.

Among modern liberal feminists Betty Friedan is a prominent figure. The feminine Mystique came in 1963. She characterized the effect of nurture rather than nature upon women as 'sex role conditioning'. She analysed that despite increased opportunities for higher education and rewarding careers women were turning back to their home. She called this the problem that has no name. She termed this problem "the feminine mystique" which she defines in her book.

"The feminine mystique says that highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity... the root of women's troubles in the past is that women

envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love”. (Friedan – 38)

She commented on individual autonomy of women and their right to self-determination. On the surface she seems to be attacking patriarchy but a subtext to her writing seems to be blaming the women themselves. In having the feminine qualities women should think themselves superior to man, their unhappiness is the result of rejecting this privileged portion.

Another important precursor in feminist criticism is Virginia Woolf. She emerged as a spokesman for women’s cause in the early decades of the twentieth century. Woolf didn’t like the compartmentalization of gender in the Victorian society. She bemoaned the partiality of sending the boys in schools and universities and pick up a trade and profession whereas girls were groomed for the responsibilities of a housewife. Girls were nurtured to become ‘Angles in the house’. In collected essays she describes her own struggle to free herself from this phantom of Victorian domesticity.

“The Phantom was a woman and when I came to know her better, I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, ‘The Angle in the House’. It was she who came in between my paper when I was writing my reviews. In those days, the last of Queen Victoria’s, every house had its Angel. (Naik-44)

Woolf viewed the ego of male as oppressive and stifling. Woolf resented the role assigned to women of nurturing, preserving, repairing & renewing. Woolf also falls in the category of liberal feminism. This feminism demands equality with men. But this demand of equality has been criticized by critics like Irigaray who argues that “ the exploitation of women is based upon sexual difference and can only be resolved through sexual difference” (Whitford-32)

Virginia Woolf probes into the socio-cultural situation of women. The main argument in her texts is about male chauvinism, male domination and the neglect of women. She is concerned about the differential roles assigned to men and women in our society. The prominent place is assigned to men in history, literature, philosophy & religion. Women have to suppress their desires and abilities because of their sex.

According to Woolf the rights of woman as an individual are severely limited. She asks on behalf of women for economic independence, privacy as well as the control of reproduction. Like Wollstonecraft she stresses the opportunity of advanced education for women. Woolf deploys room as a metaphor of body. She demands freedom for women to control their own body. While reading old texts Woolf finds out that subjugation of women is a central fact of history. A Room of one’s own metaphorically suggests intellectual freedom but this freedom cannot be achieved without freedom of body. Woolf argues that women look in creative expression because of their material impoverishment. Ironically even middle and upper class women have no control over or ownership of money. Woolf exposes that men write about women as sexual and romantic objects. A Room of One’s Own poses women as victims of themselves, victims of men as well as an unjust order by acting as flattering mirrors to men:

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its normal size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. (Woolf-37)

Woolf argues that not only political and social spheres but literature and literary criticism also are under the stronghold of patriarchy. She remarks that women have no control over their body and mind. That is why there is absence of women writers. According to her “the very fact of having a female face and body... militates against having the life of a writer.” (Wallace – 431)

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