

## LITERARY DOCUMENTATION OF AMERICAN WOMAN'S STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

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### Abstract

This paper aims at highlighting the struggle of American women for their rights. Women studies came into existence when women rebelled against suffocating constraints. Women studies in form of articles, film, documentary and short fiction drew the attention of society to the boiling and searing anger of women against their conventional, stereotypical and gender-based role. Their abilities were curtailed to fit them into domestic mould, they were tailored to fit in the structure of men's choice. The progression of paper will reveal, in a kaleidoscopic manner the very struggle, from start, of women for their natural, individual and human rights. Various works and various writers are quoted to add colorfulness to the paper. The collage of studies and narrative will help the readers to understand how long and tedious has been the journey of women for emancipation.

**Keywords :** Emancipation, suffrage, stereotypical community spirit.

### Introduction

The feminist demand about political, social and economic status of women forced the males to change their mindset regarding women. Their queries triggered unusual urgency among literary writers to espouse the cause of women by exposing the chinks in social fabric.

The legitimate emphasis and insistence of the feminists on the indispensability of self-knowledge to human understanding and future behaviour inspired a feminist consciousness among some scholars who recovered 'lost' women and celebrated outstanding heroines. (Zangrando 15)

The women's studies moved beyond 'oppression of women' and worked on multi-dimensional approach for women. Violaklein suggested interdisciplinary thrust on women's studies, she analyzed and assessed the theories on feminine Characters considering all the aspects and perspectives – biological, psychological social and historical.

Gail Parker also suggested "opened curiosity and freedom from disciplinary bias" (17).

Women studies set aside the oversimplified approach that relegates women to missing chapters in history; they felt the need to redefine history as well as women. Women studies thus replaced traditional conceptualization by analyses, hypotheses and inquiry. These studies also stressed upon the fact that women's experiences are different from men and doctrines of patriarchy need an overhauling in an imaginative and innovative way to specify the place of women. Women studies scholars have created a very impressive range and also variety of

sources with a deliberate intention and attention to the emotional and personal relationship inside and outside families.

The repositories and resources, manuscripts, diaries and journals help unearth women's issue with well-defined revelation about hushed-up issues. The issues are personal, for instance—birth control, premarital sex, sex reform; social issue – suffrage, profession, industrial labour; psychological – marital discord, domestic violence, remarriage and rights of widows. *Elizabeth Schlesinger library* is great elaboration on history of women in America and invites the attention of scholars with vast material on social and psychological issues of women. Mary Kleek researched on economic status of women, trade unions and labor organization. *American Social Health Association* also documents the response of women towards sexuality, illegitimacy, prostitution and sterilization.

*Feminist press* published ten volume of female studies series. These studies accord a comprehensive and useful compendium about issues of women and their records. Bibliographies, course descriptions, essays are preserved to elaborate on women situations. *New Programmes* offered sixty courses in seventeen disciplinary areas and in various interdisciplinary areas; such studies serve as documents of the history of women's studies in the US. The *New Letters* also lists various courses and programs on women studies.

*Woman and film : "A Resource Handbook"* is the most holistic and comprehensive collection of revelations about women comprising all their undeclared problems. Kraditor in her book, *Up from the Pedestal : Selected writings in the History of American Feminism* placed feminism and women issues within the framework of hushed-up womanly desires for self-sufficiency and self-definition.

The most prominent them of specific histories on women in the US has been the organized struggle for women's rights, particularly suffrage.  
(Zangrando 22)

Kraditor in his book *The ideas of the Woman suffrage Movement 1890-1920 Anchor Books*, New York 1971, contends that women made serious compromises to obtain the right to vote and stressed upon the need of moral superiority and sensibility of women. He also pointed out that right to vote is not panache for women as suffrage movement lacks ideology as well as foresight.

Various works on women studies unfurled how women travelled a long journey from dependent, animalistic status to human status; the relationship between socialism and feminism is also the theme in specific histories of women. Sheila Row Bothan in her book, *Women, Resistance and Revolution in the endoderm world*, vintage books, New York, 1974 also talked about rebellious side of women when they refused to accept secondary status and inferiority before men. Mary P. Ryan's *Womanhood in America : from Colonial Times to the Present* is an interpretive and thematic treatment of sex roles and socially accepted images of womanhood.

*A Biography of Emma Goldman* conveys a sheer sense of her strong commitment to her individual freedom and completeness of life in all aspects. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* clearly portrays her personal suffering and her breakdown.

All these studies aim at oppression and subjugation of women in past or even today from feminist perspectives. Simone de Beauvoir also talked about female consciousness and cruel oppression in her book, *Second Sex*. She felt that woman are made and gender is a cultural construct.

Betty Friedan in her book, *The Feminine Mystique* discussed the dichotomy between the social image or complex mystique of suppressed women's lives and reality. She discussed media

manipulated projection of women as self-sufficient mothers and wives and criticized the Freudian theory fostering the mystique.

Shalumith Firestone in her *The Dialectic of Sex : The Case for Feminist Revolution* examines, from radical feminist perspective, the factors responsible for subservient status of women. Kate Millet started a feminist assault on Henry Miller, in her *Sexual Politics*, she discussed the sociological and psychological issues of women's concern suppressed or unaddressed by male fantasy, Euphoric image of women. Rebecca Harding in *Life in the Iron Mills or The Kork Woman* gives a relentless projection of unrelieved hardships of American working class women.

The most notable work in woman studies came from Charlotte Perkins in *The Yellow Wallpaper* a concise but compelling story of a woman who loses her mental balance gradually and slowly and her descent into madness is due to her anguish and anxiety her unheard and unredressed sentiments and complaints. Kate Chopin boldly experimental not only with sexuality of women but also with the individual independence in her *The Awakening* Chopin was accused with exceeding the limits of propriety in her works. *The Awakening* and the suicide of her heroine announced her literary suicide too. Chopin main attention was a regional, Louisiana Creole culture wherein she created her character who defied traditional ethos. Gilman established an inextricable connection between ascribed sex roles and woman's status and economic independence with conventional marriage. She raised voice for double roles for women – to work and to have families.

The women studies had to cross unexamined and unquestioned approval of conventional image of women and should promote a holistic understanding of core issues of women. The studies of women aim, even today, at integrative, information sharing and interdisciplinary nature of the enterprise; women studies continue to contribute to develop attitude and methods in women's favour.

Tamara Hareven in her book talked about feminist perspective in female issues. Simon De Beauvoir also talked out supremacy of men over women. *Second Sex* by Simon is read as an essential manifesto on women's oppression and liberation. Simon said "if the feminine issue is so abused is because the male's arrogance made it a discussion" (Beauvoir 302).

Simon also says:

The curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than in their strength, each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving. (Beauvoir 156)

Simon comes hard on curtailing and tailoring of women into domestic roles. She also registers her anguish and resentment over raising the girls in shadow or sheen of their gender, she deplores over upbringing of women as women right from the beginning of their lives, are trained to accept their domestic, servile role. She openly comments : "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 200).

Simon finds that phallus is a symbol of masculine superiority and virility over a girl right from birth of a child and presence of phallus at the time of birth proves the worth of the child. Simon experiments with emancipation of women especially, when "whole pantheon, group of American women writers was resurrecting from obscurity".

American writers chose probing the individual psyche ... with a censorship that has severely restricted the literary representation of sexuality and exploration of both heterosexual love and tabooed sexual relations. (Karcher 781)

The writers, especially women writers showed requirements of verisimilitude, continuity and development. The women writers gravitated toward socio-psychological novels. They delineated the problems what they alongwith their sisters faced in actual life. They attempted to identify the available resources on which the heroines depend to continue their struggle for self-fulfillment. The women studies showcased sustaining relationship crossing across the constraints of religion, class and race to affirm that “women are the best helpers to one another” (Steel 344).

Margaret fuller upheld the ideal of community spirit as a tried antidote to competitiveness, greed and inner conflict among women. Women writers engagement with fundamental and radical causes set them very much apart from traditional and canonized male counterparts.

Women writers penned down a far more better proportion of social and radical-reform narratives than their canonical male writers. Women wrote “Art for Truth’s sake to a prominent position in our literary history (Phelps 258).

Lydia Maria child also devoted herself, in her short fiction, to arouse sympathy for native Americans.

Margaret Fuller in “The Great Lawsuit” refined self-reliance and exhorted women to develop their self-respect and learn self-sufficiency and self-help.

Women are taught from childhood to distrust their own powers and to depend on men – a lesson their culture perpetually reinforced – women could not be expected to practice self reliance without special assistance. (Karcher 786)

Margaret Fuller said : “none have more valour and willingness for real sacrifices ... than ... the champions of the enslaved African women” (356).

The writers not only broke with genteel conventions but experimental with new techniques of representation and narration in their efforts to articulate the experiences of the voiceless. (Davis 32)

Harriet Jacobs bravely showcased the humiliation of unwed mothers, unending sexual harassment, rape threats, enforced concubinage and perpetual neglect of value system.

Harper showed how American women participated in debates and in liberation struggle for Reconstruction. She also demanded freedom from sexual object fication of American rather than freedom to express their own sexuality.

Kate Chopin also believed in *The Awakening* how Robert and Edna loved each other – the most natural thing in the world and with natural politeness they respected freedom of their innocent young hearts.

Lydia child also allows the fallen heroines to awaken from a hundred year sleep and marry great grandson of the man who seduced her –a bawdy, joyous trickster who makes a mockery of all sexual taboos. (249)

### **Conclusion :**

Narrative scene is always well -dominated by male writers and they also underrated the abilities of women to describe the emotion and thoughts of people. Women, when took the pen better addressed the issues of women as they added sensitivity alongwith sensibility to the description. Women revealed the existential crisis, alienation of women and emotional indifference of men to feelings of women. The silent suffering of women found place in literature and it gushed out torrentially. The registration of women’s pain started from women studies, films, articles but culminated into feminism to espouse the cause of women augmenting their strength by suffering.

Things start from scratch and a just noticeable change gives way to mammoth decision and reforms. The struggle of women for suffrage, domestic liberty and individual status is realizing now and women are still evolving to claim their human right i.e. choice to decide for themselves.

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