

Outstretching Feminism and Rerouting the Course of Society: A Pakistani Perspective

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The current paper focuses its attention on the theorising of feminism; activism based on these theories and politics within. It holds the hypothesis that the off-shoots of contemporary feminist theories have become common and established clichés to challenge the established principles that are beneficial for both sexes. Current feminist agenda has fallen prey to its internal politicising and extreme activism in different spheres of life which has disturbed the essential appropriateness of social institutions and needs to be revised with peaceful minds in order to avoid the already deteriorating harmony in roles of sexes and the extremists positioning of biases of both sexes. Applying textual analysis on the currents of feminist theory, its activism and politics within, the paper probes into the practical manifestations of feminist politics activism from Pakistani society and places it in juxtaposition with the evolution of feminist theories to enumerate the gap between the theory and practicalities which seems to be evermore increasing. The results of this exploration try to establish the concept that in finding their freedom and equality, feminist theorists have boarded on an extremist agenda which has harmed them more politically, socially and psychologically than putting them at par with male sex in different spheres of life.

Key words: *Activism, Currents, Equality, Feminist Theory, Freedom, Politics.*

Introduction

The word ‘feminist’ is devoid of a consensus definition which, having negative implications, also marks the gradually growing ‘disinterest in feminism as radical political movement’ (Hooks, 1984, p. xi). In all its waves and their further subsequent dimensions, feminism has outgrown its



very essence that upheld itself since the works of Virginia Woolf (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949). “By feminists, we mean each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality within or outside the movement, writes about feminism, or calls her or himself a feminist in the name of furthering equality” (Richards & Baumgardner, 2000, p. 54). Yet, these researchers tend to argue that labelling is sufficient but which feminist attitudes are central to defining and marking the boundaries of feminism. DeVault (1999) argues that feminists believe that males are the oppressors and the females are the oppressed since long in history. In a speech in UN on September 22, 2014, Emma Watson seems to remark that she feels the word feminism has become ‘synonymous’ to ‘man-hating’, however, feminism is all about equal rights in society for both sexes. But then there are different modifiers attached to the very word feminism in different researches that it has become difficult to finalise the extent to which equality and liberty might be ascertained. The off-shoots of feminism since its first wave have drawn its different shades and concepts which sometimes also seem to contradict each other. As Lotz (2003) notes that there is Black, third world, postmodern, third-wave, liberal, radical, post-colonial, lesbian, and cultural feminists (p. 2). These concepts also sometimes seem to be at cross roads with each other. Feminism as a rider has mounted various horses coming on its way, be it postmodernism, modernism, deconstruction, Marxism, socialism, structuralism or any other.

The current paper discusses the internal politicising and extremism in activism in feminism theory, for which a comprehensive understanding of the chronological development of feminist theory and its practice is impertinent especially in the context of Pakistani society. Like most of the popular theories the origin of feminist theory is also westernised. The authors would be relying on the conceptual framework of Judith Lorber’s work on varieties of feminism in 2001. This paper explores the basic questions of what women wanted and where they came to. It is essentially not an anti-feminist paper, but it is antifemocracy.

Lorber (2001) groups the various perspectives of feminism into three: gender reform feminism, gender resistant feminism and gender revolution feminism (p. 8). There are also further various shades of each group. Gender reform feminism consists of *liberal feminism*, *Marxist* and *socialist feminism* and *development feminism*. Lorber (2001) argues that “Each of the gender reform feminisms face contradictions in their theories and their practical solutions” (p. 15). Liberal feminists hold the view that men and women are similar so they should have equal space in the social acts. But in practice there is a contradiction that why women should be doing specific jobs while men some other specific ones. In Marxist and social feminism, women are also allowed to do jobs even outside the houses. Yet in practice, they are also the mothers while workers are the property of state which can be owned and disowned anytime according to the need of state. Development feminism focuses on rights of women at universal level yet comes

face to face with cultural values and traditions that make males responsible for their wives and daughters. In practice in 1970s, women made their ways in the open social set up of societies like doing jobs, administering, studying and so one where they faced tiny inequalities in different social arenas of life. The inequalities discouraged them which further gave birth to other forms of gender feminism. In late 1970s started another perspective of feminism which Lorber (2001) names as gender resistant feminism. Gender resistant feminism gave birth to radical feminism, lesbian feminism, psychoanalytical feminism and standpoint feminism. These feminisms made the feminist theory further complex and gave birth to different controversies which further confused the feminist theory and movement. For example, cultural feminism emphasised the essential difference between male and female. This very much challenged the concept of developmental feminism which emphasises the equality at universal level and special treatment and rights of female in society like childcare units and special economic packages to the serving mothers.

Moreover, these resistant feminisms created further questions and made the issues even more complex. Lorber (2001) states these questions that “Are women so monolithic that they can be expected to always have similar experiences and a unitary perspective? Do gender resistant feminisms create a universal Woman that is actually middle-class, Western, heterosexual, and white?” (p. 24). Their answers further develop the complexities of feminist theory when heterosexual and bisexual feminists tend to assert that they can have autonomy even while having relationships with males, and civil libertarian call a ban for pornography which contradicts the liberal feminists’ notion that there has to be complete freedom of females in society in all spheres of life. In 1990s, there emerged another perspective of gender feminism that was revolutionary in outlook and had the potential of disturbing the very structure of hierarchy in the society. This perspective, known as gender revolution feminisms, is current in the society with its various facets as Lorber (2001) argues and comprises of further various dimensions like multi-ethnic feminism, postmodern feminism and queer theory, men’s feminism and social construction feminism. Gender revolution feminists argue that binary oppositions are fluid in nature and there is no fixed identity of anyone in the society. One human being might be associated with different cultures tastes and even sexual groups. This concept challenges the clear demarcation of categories and the very principles in society that are impertinent for balance. Concepts, ideas, activities and practices thus get mixed up and there is nothing for certain. This type of feminism further confuses the concepts and makes the ideas mixed up with no clear and definite ways and roles in the society. Resultantly, a generation of such human beings is created that holds nothing as fixed and remains in the fluidity of ideas and practices. Lorber (2001) suggests that “There are at least six sexualities; heterosexual woman, heterosexual man, lesbian, gay man, bisexual man, bisexual woman” (p. 36). And all these sexualities have different emotions and experiences for the individuals in the society.



Seldon, Widdowson & Brokker (2005) make another type of distinction in the chronological order and concepts of feminism by dividing the struggle of feminists into three. The first wave of feminism started in the mid-19th century from the Seneca Falls Convention, when 300 men and women voiced for the equal rights of women publically. The suffrage of women was demanded in the social and political set up of the society. Their proponents like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1948) advocated for the equal rights, representations and opportunities for women in the society. The second wave continuing from 1950s to 1990s became more radical and highlighted the issues related to sexualities and reproduction and the rights related to these issues. Their issues even became nationalised and drew the attention of females all over the world not just focusing the white folks. The third wave, starting in mid 1990s was predominantly influenced by post-colonialism and postmodernism that challenged everything that made one sex dominant over the other and advocated for the mixture of identities in the societies (p. 117). The mixture of conflicts, identities and concepts that gave birth to different social practices is the chief concern for the researchers here in this paper which argues that the currents of feminism in the world today has fallen prey to internal politics, conflicts and extremism in activism of feminists in different spheres of life which has taken up a hardliner stance by disturbing the essential appropriateness in the society. However, these and the struggles from the past have given rise to femocracy which is purely anti-democratic in nature and favours the supremacy and dominant popularity of female in the society.

However, the way feminist theory has been treated and presented in historical records is summed up by Hemmings (2005):

A shift from the naïve, essentialist seventies, through the black feminist critiques and 'sex wars' of the eighties, and into the 'difference' nineties and beyond, charts the story as one of progress beyond falsely bounded categories and identities. A shift from the politicized, unified early second wave, through an entry into the academy in the eighties, and thence a fragmentation into multiple feminisms and individual careers, charts the story as one of loss of commitment to social and political change (p. 116).

This conclusion suggests that there are two versions of historical records of feminist theory upheld by feminists. Some consider it a story of success while some theorists and researchers take it as a story of pain, loss and grief. In both cases, most of the feminists (Lorber, 2001; Judith, 1995; Toril, 1985; Rosemarie, 1989) agree that feminist theory is yet to go a long way although entangled in the complex web of postmodernism and cultural theories which emphasise the presence and value of cultures in all societies. As Guillaumin (1995) argues that women are appropriated in sex-age having four dimensions i.e. appropriation of women's time; appropriation of the products of women's bodies; appropriation of women's sexual obligations;



and appropriation of women's obligation to care all the family members (p. 79). The purpose of this appropriation is to diminish the individuality of women in patriarchal society. Guillaumin (1995) emphasises that women are assigned such tasks that men do not want to do. Women are thus the social tools used by men. The debate has further heightened in challenging the ongoing principles of society with the third wave of feminism which has shifted its attention from politics to culture. The cultural values thus being challenged to be replaced by feminists' agenda of freedom and equality, puts feminist theory in direct confrontation with cultural values and principles that can create a balance and maintain balance in the social positioning of both men and women. Feminist theories in Pakistan and their practices are being presented here as an example to explore how feminism is in direct confrontation with the norms and values of Pakistani society on the one hand and how feminist practices have outstretched themselves in order to gain liberty and equality. The very centre of feminism seems to have been lost in the complexities and dimensions of current feminist theories.

Saigol (2016), in her report on feminism and women's movements in Pakistan draws four conclusions: the consciousness of female has been moulded and aligned with the western feminist theories; feminist movement and practices have gone through various changes overtime in Pakistan from accommodation to conflict to collusion; the practices of feminists in Pakistan changed from education to politics and economic rights; and a consistent tension between the secular segments of society and extremists stance, sometimes, resulting in violent acts (p. 40). Shaheed (1999) argues that the contemporary feminist movements in Pakistan have shifted from focused and intense activism to a diffused movement due to confrontation with the powers embedded in politics and Pakistani culture. One significant commonality between these two researchers' conclusions is that feminist activism has come face to face with the cultural values that are either being supported by those in power or are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the masses. Tinted by the postmodern and deconstructionism, feminist theory has come to a fixation with extremity in the advocacy of culture as well as feminism. The social and political activism of the feminists has created different feminist groups in Pakistan chiefly the one belonging to upper class that tries to remain at one extreme and the middle class feminists that try to follow the upper class yet with more force and revolutionary ideas. Resultantly, the very cultural values of Pakistani society like balance of responsibilities, child care issues, family as a basic unit of society, matrimonial, divorce and job issues are at stake with the westernised version of feminist theory. Women need their identity and individuality, yet to what extent and in which spheres of social and political life is an unanswered question.

Besides the struggle by the feminists in Pakistan, the condition of female is deploring. According to Human Rights Commission Pakistan (2014) 828 rape cases have been registered, 47 thousand lady health workers have been regularised in their service after lots of public protests and rallies

by themselves, 73% ladies and children have been dislocated due to war on terror in South Waziristan, house violence has been legally considered crime by Baluchistan government, and minimum age for marriage has been fixed as 18 years by Sindh government. These are some of the salient features of activism of women in Pakistan. The Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR, 2014) states that Pakistan is second last in giving access to women to health, education and job facilities. In the wake of these conditions and considering Pakistan an ideological state where ethnic and cultural matters are in extreme sensitive conditions, the confrontations and challenges for the feminists here are going to result in extremities. Moreover, there are clearly conflicts and confusions within the broader framework of feminist theory besides the slogans that there is a need to be equality and liberty for female in the society. The same confusion has also been aptly stated by Lorber (2001) that “But to fulfill their political potential, the gender revolution feminisms need to spell out what precisely has to be done in all the institutions and organizations of a society; family, workplace, government, the arts, religion, law, and so on to ensure equal participation and opportunity for every person in every group” (p. 37).

In a recent study conducted by Minhas et al., (2020), it has been suggested that media is feeding a western kind of feminism in which detestation of male sex is predominant and that it has negative implications for the youth. Although the youth is aware that there has to be gender equality in the society but the portrayal of westernised concepts of feminism are causing hurdles for the very movement of feminists in Pakistan. The feminist ideologies are being outstretched to such an extent that the concept of gender equality is at stake. Qazi and Javid (2021) conducted the qualitative analysis of the school textbooks and have suggested that since the advent of second wave of feminism, the east has been hysterical in emphasising the awareness regarding feminist ideologies but in doing so such textbook materials have been created and developed which have stereotypical and disproportionate representation of the females. This kind of representation is further reinvigorated through teachers’ lectures. Both reactionary and apologetic approaches to over-emphasis on feminism issues have developed these kinds of approaches towards feminism resulting in vague and confused condition without arriving at clearly defined gendered equalities. As reactions to outstretched discourses of feminism, Salam (2021) argues that Pakistani men are consistently emphasising and upholding the stereotypical and discursively constructed socio-cultural norms. This finding substantiates the view that reactionary approaches are also being adopted in spite of the Pakistani’s agreement on the idea of gendered equality. This reaction is due to outstretching the feminist ideologies by dispelling the balance in society.

In postmodernism where the centre is lost, there is an unending chain of meanings and no definite meanings could be clear, the feminist theory also seems to lose its meanings. Schizophrenic and hyper tense meaning making activities of texts make the case of feminist



theorists even worse all over the world (Hassan, 1982). Deconstruction, pluralism, end of metanarratives, disintegration, multiculturalism, schizophrenia and irony are major recurrent themes of postmodernism where the author is dead, the centre is lost and every individual is caught in the complex web of search for his real identity, the feminist theory in itself is in confusion (Lyotard, 1984; Ihab Hassan, 1982; I. M. Milne, 2009; Rauol Eshleman, 2001).

As discussed earlier in the previous paragraphs that feminist theory has been influenced by the other major critical theories of the time like modernism, postmodernism, industrialism, capitalism, Marxism and socialism, postcolonialism and the others, the feminist theory has not been able to develop its own clear metanarrative to rely upon (Lorber, 2001). Yet, gender revolution feminism, taking its leads from postmodernism, deconstructs its own narrative and also challenges the existing metanarratives of various cultures where it has tried to assert its influence. The results have been unending confusions and extremism on both ends; the culturists and the feminists. Even the nations have to develop different strategies in their texts and narratives to fight for their national identities (Wodak, 2002). Different cultural forces and groups are struggling to realise their own identities and fight for their survival; the feminist theory in a country like Pakistan needs to define clearly its demarcation of liberty and equality and its arena of activism.

Conclusion

The hypothesis of the current research that feminist theories have become clichés' to challenge the established and balancing principles of the society chiefly the family structure which are in face a danger to identity of the feminists themselves. The western feminists and societies have witnessed the death of family structure as Winfry (2009) suggests that American family life has become shattered due to the ongoing thrusts and results of individualities and so called liberties. Those who are following the feminist theories dogmatically have outstretched its domains and perspective to such an extent that a movement for the rights has turned into a womb of different theories which at times challenge the very meaning on which feminism is based like postmodernism and deconstructionism. The course of social life, as seen in the west, has rerouted to other directions whose physical manifestations and practices are inadvertently opposite to the existing principles of many cultures and ways of social and political activism. The result is, thus, a direct clash, that in Pakistan sometimes results in violent outbreaks. Therefore, feminists need to redefine and realign themselves by maintaining a balance and harmony between the metanarratives of cultures and possible practicalities.



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