



Does the Present Time need Feminism? An Understanding

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It was indeed a very bright day... sipping over a cup of coffee and was scrolling down the headlines. The news of the devastation caused by the pandemic is everywhere. Regarding various welfare schemes, the government was quite lardy-dardy and the common people behaved cumbrously. Eftsoons, we got a bigger picture of the increase in the rate of crimes against women. The NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) had published data where Mumbai recorded 6519 cases of women's violence after the national capital Delhi which was about 12, 902 in 2019. Mumbai city ranked first in cases of insult to women's modesty and according to the NCRB, Maharashtra reported the highest number of cases of cyberstalking or bullying of women for the last three years (1126 cases). Inadvertently, I gasped some air and continued with my errands.

The very next day, news flashed all over the country – the ghastly event in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh. It was reported that a 19-year old Dalit woman was allegedly gang-raped and gravely assaulted by four persons. The woman was not able to survive the heinous crime – she died after two weeks of this incident. Side by side, it also revealed that atrocities against the Dalit women have surmounted to 7.3 % and the NCRB also disclosed the fact that Uttar Pradesh recorded the maximum number of cases against Scheduled Castes (25.8%). It ranks second in terms of the number of rapes against Dalit women. Not many days passed by and another rape case came into the limelight where a six years old girl was the prey. The incident took place in the Aligarh District of Uttar Pradesh. Just before this incident, another news came into the light where a twenty-four years old man of Ballia, Uttar Pradesh raped and thrashed a seventy years old woman to death, and incessantly we can continue to talk about these kinds of ghastly happenings all over India.

Before these incidents were surfacing, quite a time ago, the term 'feminazi' became much popular in the year 1992. A combination of the words feminism and Nazi, this term was made popular by an American radio talk show, which was hosted by Rush Limbaugh. As it is quite apparent, this particular word did not demonstrate a positive outlook concerning 'feminists'. According to the



Oxford Dictionary of American Political Slang, feminazi is defined as 'a committed feminist or a strong-willed woman'. The very usage of the term exposes the skeptical outlook of Limbaugh concerning the relevance of the feminist movement. Specifically, he targeted the radical feminists fighting for abortion rights. In his view, these feminists were on a mission to dominate men and seize their power thereby making them redundant. However, feminists pointed out that such a phrase was derogatory and intently tries to demean their position either as men haters or power mongers. Thus, feminazi attempts to prove that feminism, as a theory, holds no importance in today's world.

Feminism, and more specifically radical feminism, questions the very foundation of society, that is, patriarchy. Besides this, it also poses a challenge to the heterosexual system, which is considered to be the only natural norm of society. Also, it has raised voices for people of alternative sexualities, like gay or lesbians. Such deliberation is quite revolutionary as it aims to demolish the basic foundation of society, that is, the hetero-patriarchal system. The modus operandi of radical feminists has tagged them as anti-men or anti-society. Their intentions are being misunderstood and with time, people started to believe that society can thrive better without any 'feminism'.

The above scenario was perceived in the West but in the Indian context, it was no better. Indian society has its roots within traditional values which have often come in conflict with feminist views. Feminists have the vision to achieve gender equality, they try to restrain the misogynistic attitude, specifically, towards women. They neither believe in any kind of domination nor in the top-down power structure, where domination over women by men is justified. Feminists have started a movement of liberation as well as have emphasized that no individuals can be discriminated against, based on their sexual preferences. There lies the need to acknowledge the fact that society is heterogeneous and feminists strive towards it. Being vocal against the presence of any kind of fixed gender identity, feminists opine that sexuality is not related to one's sex. Any effort to address sex inequality is challenging and also breaks away all those social norms that are non-liberating. To conflate Nazi with feminism is a mistaken step as feminists' objective is to achieve an egalitarian society where all differences among individuals need to be respected along with the right of every individual irrespective of her/his social position/orientation/preference.



Reality is multiple and any belief that is considered to be 'true' needs interrogation. The ability to see things 'beyond' what it is shown is quite a task which Plato tries to explain in his allegory of the cave. He is of the view that people remain chained within their thoughts, which they consider real. Living inside the cave for a long time, they see some shadows outside and are believed to be existing. Plato expresses that given a chance, if those people come out of that confined space, then they may have the ability to distinguish the mere appearances from reality. Similarly, we have a closed system of belief and to make any kind of alteration within it, is a matter of time. At first, we may suffer from some kind of disorientation and disbelief. But with a critical bent of mind and analyzing our thoughts, a situation may be reached where one may reflect upon the 'nature' of knowledge. People and their views are still restricted and only by a true exploration of things, we may achieve a non-distorted view of reality. Then only we would arrive at a situation whereby we can apprehend the essence and intention of feminism.

We need feminism for many reasons and here, a few of them will be discussed. Our society tends to think in terms of the binary of man/woman, reason/emotion, active/passive, and so on. Man is always associated with reason and is held in high esteem in many traditional accounts for his ability to exercise his rational faculty by not being influenced by any subjective factors. Besides, it is also imperative for men to maintain an arm's length distance with others so that they may continue to execute their duties in a non-passionate manner. There is a general propensity to believe that emotions make people weak and confused, sometimes, incapable to ponder over the moral issues in an organized, logical manner, and women are also considered to be emotional. The traditional thinkers, who are mainly rationalist philosophers, consider emotion as a lower order quality of humans and valorise reason. As a consequence, women are always represented as the 'lack' in terms of rationality and the domain of rational knowledge excludes women.

Feminism contributes uniquely where it endeavors to show that all human beings are equal and have different ways of dealing with situations in life. The ability to exercise one's rational faculty cannot be the parameter of claiming one's moral



excellence. Australian philosopher Val Plumwood¹ talks about the naturalness of domination of man/woman binary, which also lies implicitly within the two-valued logic. She questions such naturalness as well as express the fact that in two-valued logic, if the word 'p' stands for men, then women are represented as 'not p', that is, they are defined in terms of the absence of 'p' and not as an independent category of 'q'. She points out that 'p' becomes the centre of power and 'not p' is forced in the background, thus, overlooking all differences and uniqueness of 'not p'. This not only ends in gender-discrimination but also in deep-rooted domination of the core/centre on the periphery/margin. In other words, it is the structural violence within two-valued logic where any kind of difference between 'p' and 'not p' is understood in terms of the dominant or superior party to the hierarchy. This kind of dualism further leads to the failure in acknowledging any positive differences, thereby, turning to a form of objectification, homogenization as well as stereotyping of individuals under the category 'not p'. Plumwood points out two-valued logic is problematic as it fortifies gender-binary and other kinds of domination.

To rise above such a form of oppression, one also needs to question the very category of 'woman' and the meaning associated with it. Heterosexuality as a system tends to be natural/normal in our society and one hardly questions such a norm. Feminism aids us to think out of the box- to question or problematize conventional social understanding. This can be illustrated by referring to the work of who is a Swiss linguist and semiotician². To understand his theory, we need to explore his linguistic theory. Let us take an example of the word 'horse'. The sound image or impression in our minds is of that representing the 'horse'. Our language system helps us to realize the mental image related to this particular word. Thus, we know the concept or the meaning associated with this particular word 'horse'. The connections between the two elements (the image and the concept) are done mentally without uttering or writing the word. The two parts are joined and formed into a mental linguistic unit called 'sign'. The part of the sign which appears as the concept or meaning is termed as 'signified', that is, the idea about a horse. What the word 'horse' creates in our mind is called a signifier. A signifier is the sound of the word or the symbols used in

¹ Val Plumwood, "The Politics of Reason: Towards a Feminist Logic" in *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, (Vol, 71, No.4, December 1993).

² The study of meaning-making.



writing it. Signified is the concept attached to the word. Saussure argues that the signifier cannot exist without the signified. Hence, the word 'horse' cannot exist in the absence of the signifier and the signified. He states that there lies no logical connection between these two and there is no reason why the letters h-o-r-s-e produce the image of an animal. He articulates this to be an outcome of convention; users of the same language group have fixed these letters or sounds to evoke a certain image. Similarly, in a patriarchal society, the word 'woman' acts as the 'signifier'. Saussure defines signifier and to quote him -

... all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other.³

The word 'woman' has a concept or meaning which is the 'signified'. The concept may not exist in reality but still has some reference to it. According to feminists like Judith Butler, 'women' is a constructed social concept; it is not 'real' per se. Still, this word confers some meaning or produces a specific image in our minds. Within the patriarchal framework, this meaning of women or the 'signified' becomes fixed with time. We see women as a signifier but a woman may not be compulsorily heterosexual or by nature emotional or care-giver. On the contrary, she may be less emotional or less caring. Here, Sara Ruddick may be referred to who says that caring as an activity should not be prescribed to women alone. She talks about the ability of men who are also equally capable of expressing care. Ruddick holds that maternity is a social practice that can be performed by men and women alike. She defines the word 'mother' as a responsible one, who provides care to a child's needs. And if this is what defines a mother, she concludes that both men and women can be mothers, as long as they receive adequate training and theoretical knowledge on this matter. As Ruddick points out that by becoming a mother, a man does not experience any change in the body. To quote her, 'to a man taunted for "being a woman," talk of parenting may be temporarily comforting. But if he is undertaking maternal work, he is identifying with what has been, historically, womanly⁴'. Ruddick believes that men can easily take up the maternal task and thus, can transcend the gender binary (though she confesses that it has not yet been achieved) and the fixed meanings attached to any gender.

³ Ferdinand De Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Generale*, tr. Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, (London: Fontana/Collins, 1916), p.71.

⁴ Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 45.



We are inclined to associate one's sexual preference with the heterosexual system. In Saussure's theory, the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and one may conceive of the term 'woman' as an empty signifier. He says that –

*language is no longer free, for time will allow the social forces at work on it to carry out their effects. This brings us back to the principle of continuity, which cancels freedom. But continuity necessarily implies change, varying degrees of shifts in the relationship between the signified and the signifier.*⁵

Keeping in mind the critical theoretical areas and the emergence of problems due to the pre-given social concepts, theorists have tried to arrest any kind of simplification. In our society, a woman's identity is based upon stabilizing the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. But this identity keeps changing by those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered-beings, who do not conform to the hetero-patriarchal norms.⁶ Such 'non-gendered' beings are none other than the homosexuals like gay or lesbians. Under the normative patriarchal framework, they are viewed as the 'non-intelligible categories', the 'developmental failures', or the 'logical impossibilities'. Henceforth, rises the demand for the space to express various alternative identities, which can be by no means subsumed under the purview of heterosexuality. As a consequence, various activists, theorists, and particularly, feminists, (lesbians) have demanded an alternative economy of pleasures, where the role of 'reproduction' cannot dominate the entire understanding of human beings.

A woman of 35 years old was forced to remain in a state of confinement for the last one and a half years by her husband inside a very small and stinking toilet. This incident happened in Haryana. When protested against sexual harassment, a 16 years old girl was shot dead by three men in Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh. These are all recent events of this year that occurred after the lockdown phase. According to the NCRB report (2019), false marriage promises led to 57% rapes in Uttar Pradesh. Besides these kinds of happenings occurring at various corners of India, on the social level, homophobia still prevails. Feminism demands a change in the ontological understanding of the categories of sex and gender. It points out the fact that heteronormativity is a power-driven category that leads to intolerance towards other sexualities, like gays or lesbians. A platform is needed so that one might have the freedom to choose, the right to express as well as the right to criticize, and feminism

⁵ Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p.78.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (UK: Routledge, 2006), p.23.



undoubtedly seeks to provide such an opportunity. It proposes active and inclusive solidarity and that is a quintessential requirement. This needs to be accompanied by interactive dialogical encounters. Such solidarity would allow individuals to 'speak with' or to 'listen to' each other with empathy. 'Speaking with' helps in accommodating plurality within various perspectives by attention to diverse narratives. Thus, it endeavors to expand the domain of communication. But at the same time feminism needs to be cautious about its various moves it takes to fight gender injustice. It needs to follow the 'power with power' structure where power is not linked to any kind of domination. It is not only feminists but various welfare programs at the administrative levels also required to realize the dream of equality and respect for all in practice. We can understand the effort behind this motive with the help of a singular instance - Kiori in Nuh has become the first village of the state of Haryana where 250 houses would be identified by the girls in the family. This became possible by the 'Laado Swabhiman' initiated by the former sarpanch of the village, Sunil Jaglan, whose selfie with his daughter received recognition from the ministers, including the prime minister of the country. It is also reported that Nuh has a sex ratio of 908 than other districts of Haryana. This kind of positive instances is surely going to rise if we attempt to change our perceptions towards human beings by not defining them solely based on the sex/gender system.