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*Corresponding author
Dr. S. Meena Priya
Dharshini, Assistant
Professor, Department
of Women's Studies,
Mother Teresa Women's
University, Tamil Nadu,
S. India
E. Mail:
drmeenapriyadharshini
@gmail.com

Research Article

Women Studies

Feminists' view point on women in politics: An overview from Mary Astell to modern Feminism

S. Meena Priya Dharshini*

ABSTRACT

Women's emancipation was thus lined to the idea of progressive social reform and historical change. But the development of feminist thought has not only been uneven, but it has always involved into deep theoretical disagreement, these partly reflect the varied needs and perception of women in different societies and situation. Within feminist politics and feminism, there are several differing political perspectives; the feminist approaches most commonly identified are those of Radical, Liberal, Marxist and Modern. This paper overviews feminists' view point on women in politics from Mary Astell to modern feminism.

Keywords: Women in politics, Feminism and Politics Mary Astell, Feminists.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a proposal for social transformation as well as a movement that strives to end the oppression of women. In this double aspect feminism has always existed as part of the historical societies, in which it has developed, it has been influenced by the specific social, economic and political traits of its society. As a movement, feminism has a long history or rebellion, more or less organized but always expressing opposition to the social institution that made possible the inferiority of women. This opposition has not been isolated from the other forms of social struggle and this relationship has influenced both the ideology and the organization of the movement. Charles Fourier, the French socialist argued that the degree of women's freedom decided the extent of social progress. Women's emancipation was thus lined to the idea of progressive social reform and historical change. But the development of feminist thought has not only been uneven, but it has always involved into deep theoretical disagreement, these partly reflect the varied needs and perception of women in different societies and situation. Within feminist politics and feminism, there are several differing political perspectives; the feminist

approaches most commonly identified are those of Radical, Liberal, Marxist and Modern.

The word feminist and the theories came into existence because the traditional political theory excluded or marginalized women. The modern feminism involves a dynamic and existing body of thoughts that is highly controversial and is constantly challenging its own assumptions.

Mary Astell who has been known as the first English feminist. Seventeenth century feminism had been inspired mainly by the conservative defender of monarchy at home as well as within the state. According to them, in state, the authority of the King over his people was sanctioned by 'God' and by nature in exactly the same way as that of father over his family. This theory of the century justifies social convenience and men's superior strength to justify the continuous subordination of women. It means they saw men as independent and rational individual capable of perceiving and pursuing their own self interest and saw women as wives and mothers and weak creatures.

Mary Astell, the strong and radical feminist has given a broader analysis of relationship between men and women. According to her

- Women's duty is to obey her husband did not involve any recognition of his superiority. She said that men are not fit to educate children for precepts contradicted by example seldom proved effective.
- She argued that submission to male authority could not extend to single women, whether poor fatherless maids like her or widow who have lost their maters
- An educated women should choose to reject the domestic slavery involved in marriage and she therefore advised women to avoid matrimony
- Women's activities need not be limited by the need to attract a husband and they could therefore concentrate on improving their minds rather than their beauty.
- As a practical means of freeing women from marriage and dependence on men, she advocated the establishment of female communities, rather like secular runneries, where women could live and learn together without men, knowing themselves capable of more things than the pitiful conquest of some wretched heart.

According to Astell, man is natural enemy to woman; and women can develop, if woman would live separately from men. No doubt, Astell was a radical feminist but she had some shortcomings in her writing that she has not said about any coherent political programme or demand that the rights of

male citizens be extended to women. There is no direct challenge to woman's socio-economic position or to the sexual division of labour.

The short coming of radical feminism had given birth to the liberal feminism of 18th century. During this time women's rationality became less fashionable than belief in their innate weakness and dependence on men. The eighteenth century is known as the "Age of Reason and Enlightenment" which are the outcome of two major events such as , the American Declaration of Independence and French Declaration of Men and Citizen. The question of rationality of men of seventeenth century was to reach to its fullest expression during this time. Philosophers of their time provided the basis for the liberal belief that as rational beings individual men have rights that must not be violated by arbitrary power. Therefore, any authority must rest upon the consent of the governed and the individual should be as far as possible, self determining and free from government control.

But above beliefs were later challenged by Mary Wollstonecraft's in her vindication of the Rights of Women and by the French writer Condorcet that women were capable of reason and should be educated. Accordingly they had therefore the same political right as men, and to deny this was an unacceptable tyranny. In practice he did not anticipate the widespread involvement of women in politics, but this he said, was no reason to deny them political rights in principle. Indeed, he argued that women could no more be biologically excluded from politics on ground of menstruation or pregnancy than could a man because he was suffering from gout. Feminism was an integral part of the complete pattern of liberalism that contracts so enthusiastically advocated. English historian Catherine Macaulay argued in her letter on Education in this regard. She insisted that the difference between sexes were a product of education and environment and not of nature; she attacked the way in which women's mind and bodies had been distorted to please men, she demanded boys and girls be given the same education and she went beyond uncritical acceptance of male values to demand that the education of boys too be changed to provide them with traditional female skills.

According to Wollstonecraft's: women are not less capable of reason than men, but vanity, weakness and frivolity were the natural attributes of her sex. She argued that if men and women equally possessed reason, they must be equally educated in its use. To her, as men's and women's common humanity based on their shared and God given possession of reason, then virtue must be the same for both sexes. She argued forcefully that a women

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taught only passive obedience to her husband which could never be fit to bring up children, women must be given education so that they can make rational choice.

Wollstonecraft insisted that women had an independent right to education, employment, property and the protection of the civil laws; this argument was needed to ensure that women were not forced into marriage through economic necessities and that wives were not entirely dependent on the goodwill of their husbands. Women therefore needed legal rights in order to make independent rational choice and achieve virtue.

Apart from the radical and liberal school, one more school is there, i.e. Utopian Socialist School; the earliest socialist thinker St. Simon, Fourier and Robert Owen saw relationship between the sexes and within the family as central issue. Changes in society were not seen as simply the by-product of social change or class struggle but were themselves a necessary precondition for the transformation of society. The feminist aspects of their thought were developed by their followers.

They had seen firstly, the goal was not equal rights with in the existing society, but within a radically transformed one in which private property was to be abolished or severely modified and in which women would have economic as well as legal independence.

Secondly, the traditional division of labour between the sexes was widely attacked, to only women were to be given a full place in productive life, but men were to share communal responsibility for domestic work.

Thirdly, the family as an institution was widely condemned: it was seen as a source of male power a bastion of selfish individualism incompatible with socialist co-operation and coercive restraint on free choice. Fourthly, the importance of free expression of sexuality, and argued that free love was the necessary basis of free society.

Another Utopian socialist, thinker, Charles Fourier was again radical, he was in favour of total abolishing of specialization of more and wanted to give free choice of work. Ideas of Owen and Fourier had been more explicitly in the writing of William Thompson who was an ardent follower of Owen and Fourier. Thompson was not simply a liberal feminist, but a socialist also. He favoured the equal rights for men and women and he asserted that the rights of women only can rest in the cooperative, socialist societies, where women would get full worth of their contribution. He was not in favour of capitalist system of society, where laws are made unequal. According to Thompson, whatever system of labour, whatever system of government, under every

vicissitude of men's condition he has always retained women as his slave.

During the nineteenth century, a new turn too in the feminist conception. They inspired the movement for the total social, legal, education, moral etc. reformation. The feminists of this period claim the moral superiority of women over men that is why the feminists of the nineteenth century were considered more radical and the feminist writers of this period were considered as reformist because they did not make any attack on the existing socio-economic system, rather wanted the extension of legal protection and right to women.

The modern radical feminist such as Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone claimed that 'the personal is political'; private life was seen as an arena in which power is both exercised and can be challenged and this meant that women's freedom was to be won not simply by allowing them to enter into public life, but by transforming their situation at home.

Gradually, organized feminism shifted from America to England and the thinking and discussion of feminism in the mid 19th century tended to concentrate in the writing of John Stuart Mill, his subjection of women was the most important writing on women's position. His friend Harriet Taylor, whom he got married after she got widowed, was also a very strong feminist writer. Her *Enfranchisement of Women* is a most feminist move by a woman. At one level, Mill's subjection of women, is simply an extension to women of the enlightened belief that an institution can be defended only if it is in accordance with reason.

Both Marx and Engels said production and reproduction as the base of the society, but on one of them gave the equal role of production and reproduction in the productive process. Marx believed that women's Question are the product of capitalist economy. So Marxist society was based on materialistic interpretation, so the basic idea is that society will not be changed by appeals to reason and justice, but collective class struggle that can only succeed at a particular stage of economic and social development.

Taking into consideration the status of women and discrimination against women, a well documented book, 'The Feminist Mystique' was published by Kennedy commission in 1963. After the publication of the book, the effect started in the same year that Equal Pay Act was passed. In 1964 a clause prohibiting discrimination by sex was added to the Civil Right Act.

Women's position has changed in many nations, but in many nations, still the right to education, employment to women is denied. Most surprisingly, even in the most advanced nations the

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public posts are held by men. Even women as a group conform for nearly two thirds of all working hours, receive only one tenth of the world's income and own less than one percent of world property while fear of sexual violence restricts their lives and they are denied full control over their own production and reproduction.

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