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What is Feminism? A Critical Note on Contemporary Discourses

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ABSTRACT

What is feminism? This seemingly 'simple' question is often misinterpreted on social media, especially among younger generations, such as Generation Z and Generation Alpha. Perhaps the notion of it being 'simple' is itself part of the issue, as it allows for a proliferation of diverse interpretations of feminism that cater to the narrative of specific 'interest groups' in contemporary society. Here, the advancement of technology in terms of easing the access to communication on global platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X and YouTube 'unintentionally' furthers the agenda of proliferating certain versions of feminism among its global audience through the active application of algorithms and, therefore, consequently building this virtual echo chambers where the users are systematically exposed to their versions of 'reality' or what they want to be 'true' based on their 'belief system' – after the ascertain of which through these virtual community more or less actively embodies and plays out their understanding in every-day interactions. In other words, how they perceive their identities in relation to others, which in this case is male understanding what female is and female perceiving what female is through the lens of male, and sometimes out of their 'own' creation within the socially constructed category of man and woman.

This paper intends to explore these issues by examining the history of the waves of feminism, thereby attempting to establish a proper understanding of what feminism is against the backdrop of this newfound contemporary social problem. Besides, the goal includes exploring the concepts, theories and methodologies of social sciences in critically analysing and understanding contemporary social problems and, hence, moving one step forward towards finding a 'solution' – as one saying goes, being able to define a problem is half the problem solved. The quote by Albert Einstein.

Keyword: Waves of Feminism, The Fourth Wave, Online Feminism, emergence of choice Feminism

INTRODUCTION

The term feminism originates from the French word *feminisme.* However, the early origin of the word *feminisme* itself is clouded in conflicting claims of late nineteenth-century France. The accepted consensus among the feminist academicians is that it might have been the probable 'creation' of the eighteenth–nineteenth century French thinker Charles Fourier (1772-1837). As to the question of the exact work and date of its 'creation', the claims often vary from that of 1808, when the first edition of his work *Thèorie de Quatre Mouvements et des destinèes gènèrales* (thereafter *Thèorie*) was published, to 1847, when the second edition of the *Thèorie* was published posthumously in *Oeuvres Complètes*. However, feminist historian Karen Offen points out that a critical analysis of this text by Fourier denies the alleged argument of feminist academicians of the explicit mention of the word. Nevertheless, she argues that in this work,

Fourier exemplifies what would later be recognised as a 'feminist consciousness' on his part, where he provides an argument in favour of progress towards women's liberation as an essential precondition for social progress in general. Thereafter, the word feminism spread in the common parlance of the rest of the English-speaking world – Europe to North America - where it increasingly became associated with the women' rights movement, while in the process came to connote the "ideas that advocate the emancipation of women, the movements that have attempted to realize it, and the individual who supports these goals" of emancipation.

The problem with this increasing temptation to anchor the definition of feminism in this simplified form of "ideas [and the movements] that advocate the emancipation of women" lies in the fact that the history of the women's movement is not one that of a single movement neither a linear one, but was one that of a claims and counterclaims. In other words, it was a polymorphic Movement. To solve this problem of variation and diverse practices, the feminist academicians have resorted to speaking of the women's rights movements in waves. So far, there have been four recognised ones – the last and the fourth wave being the main focus of this study, since it is the wave we are currently experiencing in the age of social media. Thus, the structure of this paper will be as follows: first, the first three waves will be briefly discussed; second, the fourth wave of feminism in the twenty-first century will be analysed; third, the conclusion. Before I progress with my work, readers should note here that the discussion will mainly revolve around the waves of feminism that have been highly Western-centric during its initial stages of development before it began to become more inclusive in the sense that women of developing nations began to adopt, develop and participate more actively as against the oppression that were unique to their context. This is not to argue that the feminist movement was entirely of a Western creation or that no such thing has existed natively in the culture of developing nations. However, pursuing this analysis is entirely outside the purview of this paper, besides an occasional reference insofar as it serves the objectives of this paper.

THE FIRST THREE WAVES OF FEMINISM

The academic tradition of discussing the women's rights movement in waves is not without its critics. Nonetheless, it has continued, although in a much more critical sense. Therefore, to speak of the four waves of feminism is to acknowledge that one wave was not completely done away with when the second one rose out of the oblivion with no historical context. As we will see, what distinguished each successive wave of the feminist movement was not the novelty of its problems but the methods and approaches applied in addressing them within new social contexts.

The origin of the first wave of feminism can be traced back to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, New York, where approximately 300 men and women gathered to endorse the rights of women that came to be known as the 'Declaration of Rights and Sentiments'. The main focus was around the inequalities women suffered within the institution of marriage, where women were seen objectively as a property of their husbands, and inequality in educational institutions and professions, where women were barred from most of the 'profitable employments'. The lesser-supported right of women in this convention was the women's right to vote. However, the ship of the first wave of feminism will sail around this right throughout the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Thus, two years later, the first National Convention on Women's Rights was held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850. Thereafter, several women's associations were organised to advocate for women's right to vote, with other social and economic rights, including women's right to property. Hence, one of the most significant achievements of the first wave of feminism in the American context was the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which ended franchise

discrimination based on sex. Two years earlier, in 1918, women suffragettes in Britain had secured their right to vote with the passage of the Representation of the People Act, which granted voting rights to women over the age of thirty who owned property. It would be ten years later, in 1928, when the right to vote would become universally accessible to all women over the age of twenty-one. Meanwhile, in America, the right to vote continued to be meant for women who were white, bourgeois middle class, while white working class and black women were conspicuously excluded from exercising it. Angela. Y. Davis would later comment, '*The Seneca Falls Declaration proposed an analysis of the female condition which disregarded the circumstances of women outside the social class of the document's framers*' in her seminal work *Women, Race & Class*.

This exclusion marked the foundation of the second wave of feminism, which in America coincided with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s; therefore, an initial advocacy of inclusion of marginalised and minority communities, especially black women, was initiated. This wave would also witness the initial integration of the women's movement beyond Western countries and vice versa. During this wave, the main contentions were around the issues of reproductive rights, abortion law, sexual harassment at work, domestic abuse at home, equal pay and the social equality of sexes. However, the legacy of the second wave of feminism was most firmly established around its provision of robust theoretical frameworks for studying women's problems. These frameworks would lead to a growing recognition of women's problems within the 'broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality,' including an examination of women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Thus, what emerged was the conscious separation between sex and gender – '*the former being biological, and the latter a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time*' – as is exemplified in the famous phrase of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir that '*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*' in her 1949 work *The Second Sex*. Corollary to this development was a movement towards the institutionalisation of women's issues and the proliferation of an academic culture surrounding women's studies, which would continue to play an important role in the subsequent waves of feminism.

Unlike the first two waves of feminism, the third was the conscious declaration of itself when in 1992, Rebecca Walker, a twenty-three-year-old African-American woman, declared in Gloria Steinem's Ms. Magazine 'I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third wave' in the wake of Anita Hill's rape case. But as the movement unfolded, among its many criticisms was the criticism towards the idea of 'universal womanhood' and the gendered notion of 'woman' itself. Here, we would witness the emergence of many queer theories where the privilege of heterosexuality will be question. Thus, in terms of inclusivity, the third wave would take one step further towards the inclusion of 'sub-categories' of gender, including varied sexual orientations. This process, however, will also prompt a re-evaluation of the concept of 'collective movement' with 'common grievances' within feminism. As a result, there was a push for equal rights for all individuals without associating the term feminism to express these demands. This wave is, therefore, defined as perhaps most difficult to identify because of its self-assertion of transcending identities and its individualistic tendency. Implicit in all these arguments was the belief that gender, within its binary context, has '*achieved parity or that society is well on its way to delivering it to them*', and, therefore, what was required was a struggle towards problems that were specific to individuals. The early usage of cyberspace and media was also introduced during this period, which would become the single most distinguished feature of the fourth wave of feminism.

THE FOURTH WAVE

Today, most feminist writings accept living in the new wave of feminism – often labelled fourth in the sequence of its predecessors – but remain hesitant in defining it in terms of its objectives since most of what it stands for has been the same objectives that past three movements of feminism have been pursuing to its heed. In other words, '*I can't believe I still have to protest this shit again*' is the cultural characteristic of the fourth wave. Perhaps the statement itself signals very well why it re-emerged from an academic discourse of a few specialists into a more common conversation of the general public, with an intensified urgency equal to that of the last three, if not more. Across the generations of women, there is a renewed sense of anxiety and agreement over the continuation, possibly even rising, of sexual and gender-based violence. In many instances, even rolling back previous waves' success, concerning the reproductive rights of a woman, is viewed alarmingly as a '*real backlash against the feminist achievements of the last decades*' and, therefore, the fourth wave as the epiphenomenal response to it.

Nevertheless, it is not all without any change. There has been significant expansion in terms of what intersectionality of the second and third wave means, i.e., not only in terms of race, class and gender but also inclusion in terms of sexual orientations and bodily difference as against the 'accepted aesthetic standards' – encapsulated in the term 'body positivity' – ableism and ageism. There has also been an increasing conversation of 're-embracing' the 'positive side of femininity' as a conscious subject of this process through self-determination, as opposed to being an object of a standard set out to fulfil, what has been described as the 'male gaze'. The idea of building political and identity consciousness is emphasised here. Consequently, there is also an increasing effort to reformulate and strengthen 'female alliances' among many self-identified feminist organisations and feminists, which they argue have been traditionally '*dominated by low levels of mutual trust caused by the internalization of the patriarchal perspective*' where women were often seen as mere competitors. All these changes in the fourth wave of feminism – the extension and expansion of the last three waves' objectives – have been mediated through one distinguished feature that has been highlighted as one of the most characteristic features of this wave, that is, the intensely online nature of its discourses, activism, forms of interactions and building up of an alliance of women at the transnational level.

Recently, there has been a growing debate about whether the online nature of feminism has done more good than harm. It has undoubtedly contributed to expanding the definition and popularising its ideas among the general population – even those unaware of its basic tenets know that the term exists and relates to women. The question is, can its popularity be a true measure of its success? Does popularisation always mean good? To answer this question, one will have to understand that it is not unique to the feminist movement that whenever a movement that claims to fight against the discrimination of minorities and the marginalised, whether it be in terms of gender and sex, expands from its 'original' base, the meaning of it changes based on the sociology of its participants. In all four movements of feminism, we have witnessed changes in the expanding notion of intersectionality. But the fourth wave has more to its table. To briefly explore this, I will attempt to analyse some of its variants in terms of how feminism is conceptualised within this subculture.

In 2014, the book *Girl Boss* was published by Sophia Amoruso, CEO of the online clothing brand 'Nasty Gal'. Thereafter, the notion of it spread into the social networking sites and popular media as an aesthetic of feminism. In other words, 'Girl Boss' is a woman who is a hustler, ambitious, confident, capable and breaks the 'glass ceiling' through climbing upwards in a male-dominated world of business, corporations and politics. The idea being she is a woman who can do anything a man can do despite the constraints of

a patriarchal society – she is a man in a woman's body. On the contrary, in recent times, there's a growing online trend of 'trad wife' – a neologism for 'traditional wife' – a woman who believes in the equality of the sexes but embraces the traditional gender role of a woman as a house-maker over her professional career. The subtext is the belief that women are 'inherently' in possession of certain qualities that make them inevitably good at certain tasks – raising a family, cooking, child rearing and providing emotional stability within the family. In a similar vein, there is an emerging 'girl subculture' of accepting one's 'femininity', but here the direction is more towards embracing the sexualisation of one's own body, whether it be through the practice of sexual liberation or wearing clothes that were conventionally described to satiate the male gaze. In both of the above discourses, the idea that it still serves the agenda of women's empowerment is maintained through the argument that it's the woman who is exercising her agency to be sexualised and to be a homemaker, and not forced upon by the man. But is it as simple as that?

There's a critic, of course. Most important being the standard is still a man. Whether you are a 'girl boss', a homemaker or a sexualised woman, there is an invisible standard that women are aspiring to achieve either by imitating characteristics that have been traditionally defined as 'masculine' because power has been often associated with a man, and therefore to acquire it is to behave like one, or gaining agency over one's subordination or self-objectification where the agency itself is not free from the social expectations set out by the patriarchal standards – how much of this agency is based on oneself and not one's need to be acceptable and desirable by a man?