



FEMINISM, THE JOURNEY OF INNERSELF: A READING OF FEW FEMALE WRITERS

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Abstract

The word Feminism is derived from the French word ‘**Feminisme**’ and as per Cambridge dictionary it is defined as “the belief that Women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this State.” Though social reforms towards gender equality saw its first wave in the early 19th Century, which was quit evidently reflected in some of the greatest works of the era with **Mary Wollstonecraft** being regarded as *the first truly ‘Modern’ Women*. But the contribution of female renowned authors before this period towards the Emergence of Feminism in English Literature with the heroic Portrayal of Women in their work cannot be overlooked. However, the waves of feminism have evolved over a period of time to liberate Women, Nonetheless the changes in perception of feminism continuous to be represented even by the eminent writers of 21st century who by their works have explored the depth of feminism socially, economically, politically and racially. This paper introduces from feminist writers namely **Jane Austen - Pride and Prejudice, Charlotte Bronte – Jane Eyre, Mary Wollstonecraft – A Vindication of the Right of Women, Toni Morrison –The Bluest Eye** of English literature and analyse their work by depicting gender inequality, gender indifference and structural oppression and highlighting the struggles of Women for the pursuit of equality, independence and self-realization which have made a difference in the feminist movement. This article also aims at evolving Black Feminism in Modern Era.

Keywords: - Gender Equality, Feminism, Racism, Black Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

“Feminism is the radical notion that Women are human beings (Cheris Kramarae)”

According to **Langermann and Brantley**, Men and Women are situated in the society not only differently but also unequally. The social structure of 16th Century Europe allowed Women Limited opportunities for involvement. They served largely as managers of their households and were expected to focus on pursuits for betterment of their families and refused to grant merit to Women’s views. They challenged expressing themselves in a patriarchal society. Education thought to be detrimental to the female virtues of innocence and morality and hence they were devoid of right to Education. Women who raised their voice against the patriarchal system or any injustice were exiled from their communities or witch-hunted. Later through the help of female literature writers gave pave to feminism justifying the place of women through writings. Anne Askew a well-educated English Protestant was tried for heresy in 1545 for her denial transubstantiation and was eventually burned at the stake.

The 17th Century saw no drastic changes in status of Women. Though not directly by Women’s roles within family and local community allowed them to influence the political system but they were discouraged from directly expressing political views. But 18th century marked the beginning of the British Cultural revolution. The economic changes brought by the new middle class helped Women’s role in society to evolve Women now assisted their husbands in works outside the home and found a wider market for publishing women such as **Mary Wollstonecraft** began to challenge the Patriarchal society norms and spoke out boldly and openly on women’s rights including Education and Marriage laws. Thus, Political and Social changes helped carve the way for the first wave of feminism that occurred during the 19th and early 20th century. It revolved mainly around basic legal

rights for women with a focus on suffrage. This paper highlights the issues of feminism voiced in the Literary works of the four greatest feminist writers of their time and discusses the effects of feminism experienced by the main Character in their respective Novels **Jane Austen - Pride and Prejudice, Charlotte Bronte – Jane Eyre, Mary Wollstonecraft – A Vindication of the Right of Women, Toni Morrison –The Bluest Eye.**

JANE AUSTEN – PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

The issues of feminism in the novel **Pride and Prejudice** were because of gender inequality which is clearly reflected in the system of entailment and the lack of opportunity of self realisation. The main character conveyed liberal feminism which supported individualism, freedom, choice and equal opportunity for women which women were deprived of in those time. The main character Elizabeth Bennett faces the system of entailment in which the women is dependent on the property owned by her husband. The society forces the main character to marry her cousin to keep her estate and secure her family financially as her parents have no son. However she prefer to give her Longbourn estate and refuses the help from Mr. Collins as she doesnot want to marry a man she is not in love with just because of the system of entailment. And in doing so she spoils her relationship with her mother who is very disappointed with her refusal to Mr. Collins but she secures her freedom of choosing her own mate.

Mrs Bennet says “I should never speak to you again, and you will find me as good as my word. I have no pleasure in talking to Undutiful Children.”

(Austen, 1984 :154-155)

In the words of Elizabeth Bennet “Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart.”

(Pride and Prejudice Chapter 19 Pg.4)

The main character through these words expresses her individualism and expresses herself as a women who has moral rights to speaks what she feels is rights for her.

CHARLOTTE BRONTE – JANE EYRE

Jane Eyre is highly acclaimed Novel in 1847 and the only masterpiece of **Charlotte Bronte** had a great influence upon the society at that time. Jane Eyre is the first most popular Novel to represent modern views of Women’s position in society. Until the last decade of 19th century the only occupation women can pursue was teaching as a school master and governess in a family and Charlotte Bronte had to use the pseudonyms. Currer Bell to pretend she was a male Writer.

Wang Guofu author of the literary theory of feminism says. “Jane Eyre embodies a new conception of women as heroines of vital strength and passionate feelings.”

(1987, P-225-229)

Jane Eyre is about a young orphan girl who has a difficult childhood in her aunt’s home where she was constantly bullied and ill-treated. Until one day she gains her feminist consciousness and speaks out against her aunt Reed’s discriminations. Then little Jane was sent to Lowood Boarding School where she become a much stronger and individual person. She rebelled against the hypocritical Principal of this Charity school. Mr. Brocklehurst to secure her self-esteem and dignity. Meeting with Mr. Rochester in Thornfield and falling in love with him reflected the feminism in Jane and her new thoughts. The pursuit of true love is an important representation of her struggle for self-realization and she does not measure love by status, power or property and so on and so she never feels inferior to Rochester whose status and wealth makes him so high above for Jane to Approach. Although she had a deep affection for Rochester, she refused to marry him when she finds the facts that Rochester has had a legal wife and she realized she could not stand any compromise in her marriage and self-respect and she decides to move away and starts a new life. Her story tells us that in a male dominated society women should strive for dignity and self-esteem. In the guidance of her feminist beliefs and her persistent rebel and her hard pursuit. Jane Eyre finally achieves, equality, independence self-esteem and true love.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT – A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

A Vindication other Rights of Women published in 1792 by **Mary Wollstonecraft** is a ground breaking work of literature and one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy.

A Vindication of the Rights of Women was published at a time when society was moving toward becoming more humane, thoughtful and culturally enlightened. Vindication was described as *an elaborate treatise of female education* and a work of philosophy. Through her works she attacks the educational and political theorists of the 18th Century who argue that a women does not need a rational education. The central argument of her book is that women should be educated rationally to contribute to society. She maintains the thoughts that society will degenerate without educated women, as they are responsible for educating the young. Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes Rousseau because he wants women to grow up learning that what really matters is a women’s attractiveness. She is constant in presenting the notion that men and women are one and equal in the eyes of God. As

Wollstonecraft illustrate in her book “Taught from these infancy that beauty is women’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison”.

This brings in focus the damaging ideology that encourages young women to focus on beauty and outward accomplishments which is a hindrance and prevents young women from achieving much more. She argues that educating young women would strengthen the marital relationship for a women needs to have the knowledge and reasoning skill that her husband does to maintain the partnership. She also argued that women should be able to enter the world of medicine and politics.

“If women are by inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea. Consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim.”

-Wollstonecraft, 26.

Jean – Jacques Rousseau and other believed that women’s virtues were different than men’s. Mary Wollstonecraft strongly disagreed, explaining that while men were physically superior to women, both sexes were endowed with souls by their creator and are able to develop their reason and endeavour to perfect their virtue. Thus, **A Vindication of the Rights of women** is a critical or theoretical essay concentrated on the analysis of interplay of characterisation and setting in that Universal drama staged by Men and Women in their strife for improvement of Civilisation.

TONI MORRISON – THE BLUEST EYE

The Bluest Eye written by a famous African Writer **Toni Morrison** in 1970 at its core Black feminism, Child molestation and horrors of racial oppression of Women. It discusses about how black women are struggling to achieve Independence and are suffered a lot by Whites and the patriarchal society. The Protagonist in this novel is a young girl Pecola victimised adolescent black girl who longs for blue eyes because of her lower self-esteem to attract and escape racial discrimination. She strived to create a new identity in the American society through her blue eyes. It depicts how the color white is the essence of beauty in her society and describe the racism, sexism and class gender attached with the color. The plot reaches its brutal climax during Cholly’s rape of his own daughter Pecola which is narrated completely through Cholly’s perspective. The omission of Pecola’s perspective of the horrific event demonstrates the silencing effect of male oppression over women.

It had occurred to Pecola sometime ago if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures and knew the sights if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful. She herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful may be Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too. May be they’d say, “Why look at Pretty – eye Pecola we mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.” (Morrison, 1970 :46)

These quotes imply that Pecola blames herself because of her ugliness she was rejected not only by the society but also her family too. Thus, in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* the Protagonist Pecola aligns herself with whiteness and universally associates her search for identity with the aesthetic values of Anglo American Culture. The result of her wrong aesthetic investment are the devastating consequences of her dream, which makes her succumb to the damaging effects of the whites’ values, which deny black identity and humanity. Morrison through her writings of black feminism frequently stimulates black women to love themselves, their races and their culture and not to trap in white superiority or white beauty standards.

CONCLUSION

This paper delineates on the issues of feminism and consequences they face in their time. Different centuries have different perception about feminism. Feminist writers gave a path to feminism justifying the place of Women through writings. Through literature women writers have spoken and given freedom through their minds and thoughts to have space in the World. Political and social changes helped to carved the way for flourishing their self-reliance. The myth that was made within the stereotypes that Women was just a material has totally change by these female Writers by giving wings through literature.

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