UNIT 4: LIBERAL FEMINISM AND RADICAL FEMINISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2. Liberal Feminism

- 4.2.1 Conceptual Roots of Liberal Feminist thought: Importance of Rationility
- 4.2.2 Liberal Feminism in Eighteenth Century Europe: Equal Education
- 4.2.3 Liberal Feminism in Nineteenth Century: Equal Liberty
- 4.2.4 Liberal Feminism in Twenteeth Century: Sameness Versus. Differences
- 4.2.5 Critique of Liberal Feminism

4.3 Radical Feminism

- 4.3.1 Radical-Libertarian Views on Sex/Gender System
- 4.3.2 Radical-Cultural Views on Sex/Gender System
- 4.3.3 Sexuality
- 4.3.4 Reproduction
- 4.3.5 Motherhood
- 4.3.6 Critique of Radical Feminism

4.4 Let Us Sum Up

4.5 Further Reading

4.6 Answer to Check Your Progress

4.7 Model Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this chapter you will be able to –

- Understand liberal feminism and its conceptual origin
- Understand different categories of liberal feminism
- Understand liberalist views on rationality, equality, education and freedom
- Understand radical feminism and its categories

- Understand radical feminism, its categories and their views on gender, sexuality, reproduction and motherhood.

4.2 LIBERAL FEMINISM

The history of feminist thought can be divided into following categories; Liberal, Radical, Marxist/Socialist, Psychoanalytic, Care-focused, Multicultural/Global/Colonial, Eco-feminist and Postmodern/Third wave feminism. Liberal Feminism has evolved from the school of political thought i.e. Liberalism. There are two types of liberal feminists: classical and welfare. Classical liberal feminists view political and legal rights very crucial and important and hence they favour limited government and free market. Issues like freedom of expression, religion and conscience occupy a major part in classical liberal feminist thought. On the contrary, welfare liberal feminists put more emphasis on social and economic rights as according to this school of thought; social and economic rights are the condition of possibility for the exercise of legal and political rights. They also emphasise on the role of government towards people especially underprivileged section of society in providing housing, education, healthcare and social scrutiny. Unlike classical liberal feminists, welfare liberal feminists favour a limited role of the market. In this unit we will discuss about liberal and radical feminism.

4.2.1 CONCEPTUAL ROOTS OF LIBERAL FEMINIST THOUGHT: IMPORTANCE OF RATIONALITY

Liberal political thought views the capacity for rationality as the uniqueness of human beings which is also manifested in their belief that it is the reason that separates humans from other animals. Attempts have been made by liberalists to define reason in various ways, but mostly they have stressed its *moral* aspects or *prudential* aspects. In moral terms, reason is defined individuals ability to comprehend rational principles of morality which stresses the value of individual autonomy. On the other hand, in prudential terms, reason is defined individuals ability to determine and select the best possible means to achieve the result one desires, which stresses the value

of self-fulfilment. Liberalists always prioritize 'right' over 'good'. They have tried to justify the entire system of individual rights on the ground that these rights provide such a framework within which people can choose their separate goods without depriving others of theirs. In this context, religious freedom can be mentioned as an example where each and every individual have the right to practice their own version of spirituality. But this "right over good" is also under criticism. Critics are of the opinion that it will be a challenge to create political, economic and social institutions that maximize individual freedom without compromising community's welfare; as the resources are limited (as liberalists claim) and each and every individual will try to collect as many resources as possible.

In the context of state interventions in both *private* and *public* sphere, both classical liberalists or libertarian and welfare liberalists or egalitarian have their different sets of opinions. Classical liberalists are of the opinion that the state should confine itself to protecting civil liberties such as property rights, voting rights, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association etc. There should be no intervention of state with the free market rather the state should provide equal opportunities to everyone so that they could determine their accumulations within the economy. In contrast, welfare liberalists believe that the focus of state should be on both economic disparities as well as civil liberties. As according to them, not every individual can get their fair share of what the market has to offer, This makes state interventions necessary to make some adjustments to decrease inequalities. For instance, state interventions should be there in the economy in providing legal services, school loans, low – cost housing, healthcare, social security etc so that the inequalities caused due to the market can be minimised.

Contemporary liberal feminists seemed to favour the welfare liberalist model though both classical liberal and welfare liberal streams of thought constitute the liberal feminist thought.

4.2.2 LIBERAL FEMINISM IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE: EQUAL EDUCATION

Before the stronghold of industrial capitalism, productive works were done in and around the family by both men and women. But the forces of industrial capitalism slowly and steadily started to draw labour out of their homes to the public workplace. Its adverse affect was seen on the women who were left at home with little or no productive work to do. As described by Mary Wollstonecraft in her book, '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"*; women were not allowed to take their own decisions, lacked liberty and discouraged from developing rational abilities which eventually lead to the portrayal of woman as more of moral and emotional rather than rational.

Liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft emphasised the need for a kind of education for woman which would enable them to develop rational as well as moral capacities so that they can utilise their full human potential. As rationality was treated by the liberalists as the distinguishing factor which separates human beings from animals, society should provide woman with the same education that it provides to man. Liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft treated traditional male traits associated with education as the correct path which should also be applied to woman's education. They wanted woman to become autonomous decision makers but their path to achieve this autonomy never went beyond academic boundaries, it failed to provide concrete guidance. Women's political and economic independence from man was not considered necessary rather they argued that *well-educated* woman does not need to be economically self sufficient in order to be autonomous. They wanted woman to attain personhood, as for traditional liberal feminists woman was not just *a means* to man's happiness or pleasure rather she was *an end in herself*; a rational agent with the full capacity for self determination.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What are the categories of liberal feminism?

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Q2. Who wrote the book, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women"?

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4.2.3 LIBERAL FEMINISM IN NINETEENTH CENTURY: EQUAL LIBERTY

Two of the major proponent of nineteenth century liberal feminism was John Stuart Mill(1806-1873) and Harriet Taylor (Mill)(1807-1858). Some of their significant contributions were, "*Early Essays on Marriage and Divorce (1832)"*, co-authored by both Taylor and Mill, *"Enfranchisement of Woman (1851)"* authored by Taylor and *"The Subjection of Woman (1869)"* authored by Mill. Like their predecessors, Mill and Taylor also emphasised on rationality but they conceived of rationality not only morally but also prudentially. For them autonomous decision making was as important for woman. In order to achieve sexual equality or gender justice, women must be provided with the same education, political rights and economic opportunities as men. Taylor suggested that besides being housewife and mother, women should add a career to contribute materially to support the family; which according to her was very much essential to be true equals to men. In Taylor's opinion working woman should keep domestic help if required; which at the same time also indicates that Taylor belonged to an upper middle class family. Her writings were also directed towards a certain privileged class of women rather than all women in general.

Mill on the other hand, denied intellectual and moral differences between men and women in general. According to him, intellectual gap between men and women was nothing but the result of men's education and privileged position He also pleaded for women's suffrage as he believed that given the right to take part in active political election, women would also feel obliged to the benefits of society and would cast their votes accordingly. It will also enable them to think beyond themselves and their family. Despite his high regards for intellectual abilities of women in general, Mill also assumed that even under ideal circumstances women would prefer family over career.

4.2.4 LIBERAL FEMINISM IN TWENTEITH CENTURY: SAMENESS VERSUS DIFFERENCE

The changing character of liberal feminism and the debate around *Sameness vs. Difference* in twentieth century is evident in the writings of Betty Friedan (1921-2006). Three of her major works were *"The Feminine Mystique" (1963)*, *"The Second Stage" (1981)*, and *The Fountain of Age" (1993)*.

Friedan was initially of the opinion that contemporary women should find meaningful full time work in the public workplace; for which she did not want women to sacrifice either their marriage or motherhood. Instead their partial absence from home would make their male counterparts i.e., husbands and children more self sufficient. Friedan valued the institutions of marriage and motherhood along with the need of women's own identity, equality and political power, which was well, reflected in her 1963 classic *"The Feminine Mystique"*. But Friedan overlooked the fact that even for a privileged woman, combining marriage and motherhood with a successful career would be difficult without some structural changes within and outside the family.

In her second major work, *"The Second Stage"*, Friedan stressed that women and men together should be able to develop

the kind of social values, leadership styles and institutional structures needed for their fulfilment of personality in both private and public sector equally. In this context she insisted the need of flextime (an arrangement that allows the employees to decide their in and out time) for women especially mothers to take better care of their children. In this regard, she also added that women's assimilation into public sphere also requires men's assimilation into private sphere otherwise women would always have to work harder than men. According to her women does not need to deny their differences from men to achieve equality with men. More importance was given to gender specific laws than gender neutral laws to secure equality between the sexes.

In her third major work *"The Fountain of Age* "she focused on androgyny. As she described that along with aging people develop themselves fully and go beyond the polarised sex roles and creatively focused on the area which they neglected to develop in their youth. For her, happiest persons are those with androgynous character. Friedan also put more emphasis on "human wholeness" as for her it was the true "promise of feminism". Feminism should move beyond the women's issues and should try to focus on working with men on concrete, practical and everyday problems so that both could live and work as equal persons.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. What is flextime?

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Q4. What is androgynous personality?

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4.2.5 CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL FEMINISM

Non-liberal feminists often dismissed liberal feminists. Their major ground of this dismissal is that liberal feminists thought seldom advocate all women's interests. Rather they advocate the interests of privileged women who because of their privilege can think and act like men.

- **Reason, Freedom and Autonomy**

Alison Jaggar(Sept.23,1942) in her book, *"Feminist Politics and Human Nature" (1983)* criticised liberal feminism. As according to her; rational, free and autonomous self which liberal feminism favour is not neutral between the sexes. Most of the liberalists including liberal feminists accept normative dualism (it is a view according to which functions and activities of the mind are better than those of the body). For Jaggar this adherence to normative dualism is problematic for feminism. First it devaluates the bodily activities and functions and secondly it can lead to "political solipsism" and "political skepticism". Political solipsism is the belief that rational and autonomous persons are different from other individuals; their needs and interests are also separate and even contrasting to each other. Political scepticism is the belief that the fundamental questions of political philosophy such as what constitutes human well being and fulfilment; have no common answer. Jaggar criticised political solipsism on the ground that individual identities are determined by socially constituted wants and desires or individual selves are the creation of the community. She also criticised political skepticism of liberal feminists that it also depends on an overly abstract and individualistic conception of the self.

- **Over Emphasising Male Values**

Jean Bethke Elshtain(1941-2013), a commutarian political theorist also criticised liberal feminism on the ground that it has given more importance on so called male values. She criticised liberal feminists like Friedan, Wollstonecraft, Mill and Taylor for equating male being

with human being, manly virtues with human virtues. She identified three major flaws of liberal feminism – firstly, their claim that women can become like men if they set their minds accordingly, secondly the claim of liberal feminists that most women want to become like men and thirdly that all women should want to become like men.

Elshtain refuted the general liberal feminist belief that male-female differences are product of culture rather than biology and also the refusal of liberal feminists to accept the possibility that some sex differences are biologically determined. She also observed that liberal feminists overestimated the number of women who wants to be like men. In contrast Elshtain suggested that women should work toward the kind of society where women as well as men have enough time for friends and family as well as for their professional commitments.

- **Racism, Classism and Heterosexism**

  Liberal feminists are also being criticised for being only or mainly focusing on the interests of white, middle – class, heterosexual women; largely ignoring black women's concerns. Classism also existed within the initial liberal feminists as most of them belonged to the upper middle class. Heterosexism also posed problems for liberal feminism as most of the liberal feminist activists feared that a vocal and visible lesbian constituency within the women's rights movement could further alienate the general public from the issues of women's rights.

4.3 RADICAL FEMINISM

A group of feminists in the 1960s and 1970s opposed the ideology of those of liberal feminists and who perceived themselves as revolutionaries rather than reformers are known as radical feminists. They have claimed that women's oppression is more fundamental than other forms of human oppression. In this context, as described by Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg(Jan.17,1943) radical feminist's view can be presented with five key points. They are –

- Women were historically the first oppressed group,
- It is the most widespread, existing in virtually every known society,
- It is the most hardest form of oppression and cannot be eradicated by social changes such as abolition of class society,
- The oppression of women causes them the most suffering, both qualitatively and quantitatively but it often go unrecognised due to the sexist prejudices of both the oppressors and the victim.
- Women's oppression can be a model of understanding for all other forms of oppression.

Though the radical feminists agreed to the principle that sexism is the first, most widespread or deepest form of human oppression but their opinions differ when it comes to the best ways to eliminate it. This difference splits them into two camps – *"radical-libertarian feminists"* and *"radical cultural feminists"* and both of them voiced different ways to fight sexism.

Radical libertarian feminists claimed that an exclusive feminine gender identity will limit women's development as full human persons. Hence they concluded that women should try to develop androgynous personality (a personality with both feminine (good) and masculine (good) characteristics).

On the contrary the radical cultural – feminists expressed the view that it is better for women to be strictly female/feminine. Women should try to be more like women and should emphasize the values and virtues culturally associated with women and deemphasize the values and virtues culturally associated with men. Despite the cultural variations all women share one the same female nature and the less influence men have on this nature, the better.

4.3.1 RADICAL-LIBERTARIAN VIEWS ON SEX/GENDER SYSTEM

Radical – libertarian feminist Gayle Rubin(1949-) described sex/gender system as a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. Patriarchal society uses certain facts about male and female biology

as the basis for constructing male and female gender identities and behaviours which empower men and disempowered women. In this regard, patriarchal society convinces its members that its cultural constructions are 'natural' and hence peoples 'normality' depends on their ability to display whatever cultural identities and behaviours are culturally linked to their biological sex.

In her book, *"The Sexual Politics" (1970)* Kate Millet(1934-2017) expressed her view in support of elimination of male control in both private and public world in order to achieve women's liberation. And to eliminate male control, men and women have to eliminate the patriarchal construction of sexual status, role and temperament.

Shulamith Firestone(1945-2012), another radical libertarian feminist claimed that the material basis for the sexual/political ideology of female submission and male domination was rooted in the reproductive roles of men and women. To support her argument she favoured artificial reproduction over natural reproduction which according to her would end the need for biological family and eventually men and women will be freed from their biological gender roles.

4.3.2 RADICAL-CULTURAL VIEWS ON SEX/GENDER SYSTEM

Marilyn French(1929-2009) a prominent radical-cultural feminist attributed male-female differences more to biology (nature) than to socialisation (nurture). She also claimed that oppression of women could logically lead to all other forms of human oppression. She also added that if male domination over women could be justified than it was possible to justify all forms of domination. Patriarchy, according to her, was born out of men's desire to control women/nature, which is a hierarchical system which values power over as many as possible. She insisted that feminine values must be reintegrated into the masculine society created by patriarchal ideology. For her, androgynous society is the best where women

and men embrace the historically feminine values such as love, compassion, and nurturance as eagerly as human embrace the historically masculine values such as control, possessiveness and status.

4.3.3 SEXUALITY

Radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminists have different views on sexuality. The following are the radical-libertarian views on sexuality-

- All sexual practices are characterised by repression. Patriarchal bourgeois society stigmatizes the sexual minority and keeps the majority under control by repressing sexual desires of all people,
- Feminists should refuse to accept all those theoretical analysis, legal restrictions and moral judgements which stigmatizes sexual minority and restrict their freedom.
- Feminists should reclaim the right to control over female sexuality
- For radical-libertarian feminists the ideal sexual relationship is that when two equal, fully consenting partners negotiate to maximize their sexual pleasures by any means they choose.

Radical-cultural feminists views on sexuality-

- Heterosexual relationships are characterised by the ideology of sexual objectification of women which also supports male sexual violence against women.
- Feminists should refuse to accept any sexual practice that support or normalizes male sexual violence.
- According to them women should reclaim control over their female sexuality according to their sexual priorities
- Ideal sexual relationship is the one which involves two fully consenting equal partners who are emotionally attached and do not participate in polarised roles.

4.3.4 REPRODUCTION

Radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminists also differs on their ideas about reproduction.

On one hand radical-libertarian feminists believed that women should substitute natural modes of reproduction with artificial ones. The less, women are involved in natural reproduction, the more time and energy they will have to engage themselves in productive processes of society.

On the other hand radical-cultural feminists believed that natural procreation was in the best interest of women. For them, ultimate source of women's power rests in their power to generate new life. Women's power to procreate is their trump card without which they would be vulnerable to men's power.

4.3.5 MOTHERHOOD

Radical-libertarian feminists have provided strong arguments against biological motherhood. Ann Oakley (Jan.17, 1994) criticised the major social assumptions that favours biological motherhood. They are – first, that all women need to be mothers, secondly that mothers need their children otherwise she will be increasingly frustrated and on the other had children need their mothers. Oakley criticised all the three assumptions on the ground that social mothers are just effective as biological mothers. Children do not need their biological mothers more than their biological fathers. Men are equally capable to play a vital role in upbringing of children. Finally on-on-one child rearing is not necessarily better than collective socialisation or 'multiple mothering'. In her estimation, biological motherhood is not the natural need of women and reared by one's biological mother is also not the natural need of children. For her, biological motherhood is a social construction, a tool of oppression.

On the contrary, radical-cultural feminists are of the view that no women should renounce, in the name of 'liberation', what the

female biology has to offer; rather women should experience biological motherhood on their own terms. Reproductive technology cannot fully liberate women. Each and every woman should have the chance to use her body as she thinks best and they should rear children with feminist values.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. What are the categories of radical feminism?

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Q6. What is Patriarchy according to radical-cultural feminists?

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Q7. Which category of radical-feminism provided its argument against biological motherhood?

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4.3.6 CRITIQUE OF RADICAL FEMINISM

Critics have pointed out that radical-feminism does the same mistake as liberal-feminism in its thought. That is the insistence on making everything a 'choice', whereas in a patriarchal context women's ability to choose is enormously limited.

Critics also feel that radical-cultural feminists have been wrong in their assertion that man and woman are two completely different creatures both biologically and ontologically and there's no way to change either's nature. They have also suggested the radical-cultural feminists to overthrow the categories which entrap both women as well as men in roles where every man is exploiter or oppressor and every woman is a victim. In contrast, the fact is that neither every man is an exploiter nor every woman is a victim. In

support of this argument critics have pointed out those women who played vital roles in social history and those men who supported women's liberation movements.

Radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminists should need to bridge the gap between themselves to avoid unnecessary polarisation.



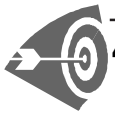
4.4 LET US SUM UP

- History of feminist thought can be divided into different categories.
- Liberal feminism has its origins in liberal political thought.
- Liberal feminism has two categories – Classical liberal and Welfare liberal feminism.
- Rationality, right to education, right to equality, sameness vs. difference are some major areas of concern in liberal feminism.
- Mary Wollstonecraft, J.H. Mill, Harriet Taylor (Mill), Betty Friedan are some of prominent figures in liberal feminism.
- Radical feminism emerged out of opposition to the ideology of liberal feminism.
- It also has two divisions – Radical-Libertarian and Radical-cultural feminism.
- Gender, sexuality, reproduction, motherhood are some major areas of concern in radical feminism.



4.5 FURTHER READING

1) Tong,Rosemarie.(2009).*Feminist Thought-A More Comprehensive Iintroduction.* Colarado:Westview Press



4.6 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR QUESTIONS

Answer to Q1: Classical Liberal Feminism and Welfare Liberal Feminism.

Answer to Q2: Mary Wollstonecraft

Answer to Q3. Flextime is an arrangement that allows the employees to decide their in and out time.

Answer to Q4. A personality with both feminine (good) and masculine (good) characteristics.

Answer to Q5. Radical-Libertarian and Radical-Cultural Feminism.

Answer to Q6. Patriarchy is a hierarchical system which values power over as many as possible and which is born out of man's desire to control woman/nature.

Answer to Q7. Radical-Libertarian feminists.



4.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Answer in one or two words:

a) Who wrote the book, "The Sexual Politics"?

2. Write short notes: (within 150 words)

a) Write about the views of radical feminists on women's oppression.

3. Long answer type Questions: (within 300-500 words)

a) Discuss about the debate around sameness vs. difference of twentieth century liberal feminism.