

Emergence of 'New Woman': A Study of Origin of the Phrase in the West from Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *The conventional ideal picture of woman in English fiction started undergoing change towards the end of 18th century and beginning of 19th century. All Victorian women novelists addressed the issues related to the women, education, abolition and social responsibility. While the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth century discovered woman to herself. New Woman became the central character of the fiction. New Woman challenged the male patriarchy, enthused the intellectuals to redefine gender roles and emphasized the women's rights. New Women included social reformers, novelists, female students and professional women. The depiction of "New Woman" has become a reality in modern and post modern literature. Attitudinal shift can be seen in the woman who despite of all kinds of upheavals, is able to strike a balance among diverse spheres of her life. The present paper is an attempt to make a systematic study of the origin and growth of New Woman in the West through exploration of western feminism & feministic theories.*

Keywords: *New Woman, Victorian Women Novelists, Patriarchy, Western Feminism*

I. Introduction

Any discussion on the emergence of the phrase 'new woman' needs thorough insights on the term 'Feminism'. The term 'Feminism' means a deep consciousness of individuality as a woman and responsiveness towards womanly problems. History shows that the woman was suppressed even in the olden times and this repression has been the root cause of all psychological disturbances in society. "Feminism" has come out as a strong defiance to the existing constitutions of control and gender equations at various levels such as the family, the society, the politics and the economy. Different writers, critics and thinkers have defined feminism in different ways. Janet Richards defines feminism in his book "*Women writer's Talking*" (1981) as "*The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that woman suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex; the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism.*" (3)

David Bouchier in his work "*The Feminist Challenge*" (1983) states that "*The feminist movement includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sexes.*" (2) In simple words, one can say that feminism is basically a set of ideologies and movements that have a common aim of defining, establishing and achieving equal rights for women in all domains of life may it be social; political; cultural; religious; economic etc.

An Exploration Of Growth Of Western Feminism And Feministic Theories

The feminist perspective in any study requires a brief outline of the growth of western feminism and feministic trends which have impacted the women of the East. Now, let's briefly have a brief discussion on the history or to put the other way the journey of western feminism from 19th to 21st century. Mary Wollstonecraft pioneered in the field of women empowerment when she came out with her first feminist discourse "*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*" (1792). Mary promoted equality of genders on moral & social fronts. She is regarded as the grandmother of British Feminism. Mary's thoughts gave birth to the idea of 'woman empowerment'.

First wave of feminism

Industrial society and liberal politics provided environment to the growth of First wave of feminism. First wave of feminism was concerned about the access and equal prospects for women. It influenced "*feminism in both western and eastern societies throughout the 20th century*". (Krilokke 1) Most of the people falling in this category were sensible and used to abide by the traditional propriety. They were not activists. They remained silent on the subjects like birth control, abortion and reproductive rights of women.

Second wave of feminism

Bishun Kumar in his paper "*Contemporary feministic Echoes in Anand's Novels* (2011)" opines that "*The seeds of feminism were sown centuries ago but it evolved as a revolutionary group in 1966 when Betty Friedan formed 'National Organization of Women' (NOW) in America*". (64) It gave birth to the "second wave of feminism in 1960s to 1970s". (Krilokke 1) This wave was a transitional phase bringing out the women from passive acceptance of their own maltreatment to confrontation and rebellion, "*from Victorian morality to renaissance humanism, from nervousness to truthfulness and openness,*" (Kumar 65) This scope of this wave was widened as second wave feminists debated on a variety of issues such as sexuality, family, and political and legal inequalities. They not only demanded equal rights for women but also emphasized supremacy of females over males.

A chain of books like Beauvoir's "*The Second Sex*" (1949), Friedan's "*The Feminine Mystique*" (1963), Millett's "*Sexual Politics*" (1969), Shulamith Firestone's "*The Dialectic of Sex*" (1970), contributed in the commencement and growth of western feministic theory.

Third wave of feminism

Third Wave of Feminism started in mid 1990s. The movement came up as reaction to the failures and repercussion against plans developed by the second wave feminists. The thinkers of this movement believed that there is a difference of ethnicity, religion, color and cultural background among women. This variety and transformation is considered by the third wave.

Western feminism primarily sought to understand the prevailing hegemonic power structures in the society, social institutions and male supremacy and kept its focus on the attainment of a few privileges to females like voting right, right of the wedded woman to undertake the transactions of sale & purchase of assets and the right of defendants to have females on panel of adjudicators. "*The term masculine and feminine are used systematically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers....*". (Beauvoir 97)

Origin Of The Phrase 'New Woman' From Victorian Period

Towards the end of 19th century, feminism turned out to be a free-ranging revolution. "In American culture, it cut-off the woman's movement from Christianity and conservative propriety and became the part of broader '*revolt against formalism*'. These new feminists were determined to 'realize personality,' to achieve self-determination through life, growth, and experience, thereby giving birth to new woman." (Allen 7) As Charlotte Perkins Gilman described her: "*Here she comes, running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman.*" (Allen 32)

In Victorian society of England, the popular opinion was against woman and she was ordered to take up the conservative middle class woman's career of marriage and motherhood. In fact, her role was fixed by the Victorians as she was not allowed to transgress against sex, gender and class distinctions. "Women can rarely have been held in lower esteem than they were at the end of the 18th century." (Morgan 339-50) So, the emergence of 'New Woman' was inevitable. In the last two decades of Victorian age, one could see the beginning of change in attitude of society on the question of gender relations; the concept of patriarchal male domination was punctured and the modern concept of gender equality gained momentum. Serious discussions started on issues of marriage and divorce laws, right to property, custody rights, educational and employment opportunities for women, female suffrage. Socio-cultural forces, new science, new technology, new education and trends towards liberalization brought about the emergence of the new woman in fiction.

The phrase "New Woman" was invented by the author Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in the North American Review in March 1894. It was Henry James who developed the phrase 'New woman' (Stevens 27) when he used it to describe American emigrants living in Europe. Sensitive women who possessed material wealth showed a free spirit in their attitude and behavior. They became responsive as a result of various social, political and economic forces and took up the new positions in cultural, social, political and economic life.

So, one can say that the roots of New Woman can be found in the organized movement of feminists of 19th century who raised the woman's issues in public debates, in print media and during election rallies. The Married Women were allowed to keep and manage their earnings by the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870. Furthermore, the women obtained the rights to have the possession and control of their property. For the first time in 1878, the women were conferred upon the degrees of B.A. by the University of London. New Woman was "intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting" (Sally Ledger 8).

New Woman In Victorian Fiction: Rise Of New Women Novelists

A famous African American woman E.W. Harper in her first novel "*Shadows Uplifted*" (1992) deals with the issues of women, education, abolition, social responsibility. Harper observed that while "the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth century is discovering woman to herself." Jane

Austin addressed the woman question rejecting stories in which women their virtue against male sexual advances. Like other writers Jane Austin's perception of women and their rights was ambivalent as we don't find a clear cut stand on "women question" in her novels. The picture of New Woman is depicted for the first time in the Victorian history; their lives are entirely different from the pictures painted of women as suppressed, passive victims of a patriarchal society. Elizabeth and Jane are intelligent, rational, critical are held in high esteem by men whom they love and marry

In the Victorian fiction of 1880s and 1890s, the image of the new woman was conspicuous. In the words of W. T. Stead the Victorian novels are "*by a woman about a woman from the standpoint of Woman.*" (5). George Eliot is considered as the greatest Victorian woman who had met all the leading feminists associated with the women's movement. But her support for reform was ambivalent. In fact she never took a radical stance on the "woman question". George Eliot was considered as a role model for Victorian women but her new women characters were puppets. In novels like George Gissing's "*The Odd Women*" (1893), Percival Pickering's "*A Pliable Marriage*" (1895), and Arabella Kenealy's "*A Semi Detached Marriage*" (1899), New Woman is fiery, sexual and passionate. D.H. Lawrence wrote "*Woman in Love*" (1920) presenting Ursula and Gudrun Brandwin who are educated, intellectual, conscious of their rights and very critical. Life and works of Lawrence express his quest for truths about love, marriage and sex. His novels launch an attack on the "goody Victorian morality" and artificiality. The Victorian society was lifeless and false. He was inspired by Thomas Hardy and wrote "*Study of Thomas Hardy*" (1914) and by the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. All his novels "*The Rainbow*" (1915), "*Women in Love*" (1920), "*Sons and Lovers*", (1995), "*Lady Chatterley's Lover*" (2000) reflect his exploration of sex and the image of a New Woman. According to Lyn Pykett, "*The New Woman novels [...] were much more directly linked to contemporary controversies surrounding the Woman Question, and to the various discourses within which they were produced and mediated.....*" (7) There were many women novelists who projected the themes of domestic violence, celibacy, inferior status women in their novels. For instance, Olive Schreinner advocated free love; Gissing advocated celibacy for independent women. Benjamin Disraeli wrote *Sybil* (1845) presenting bold and radical women.

Impact Of Flappers On The Growth Of New Women

In 1920, the movie *The Flapper* was a great box office hit and It created a sensation in the film world presenting for the first time the image of New Woman who became famous as Flapper. The title character was played by Ginger, a wayward modern girl, uncompromising, rebellious, educated and highly fashionable. Ginger became so much popular that she became a role model of many women in America who were feeling suppressed under patriarchal system. This New Woman didn't play the rules, flouted the rules of society and was "tabloid fodder" for years for her sexual escapades with the biggest movie stars of the time. The rise of automobile was another major factor in the popularity of flapper culture. New Woman started taking sexual liberties; she spent time in drinking, dancing and dating with her friends openly. New Woman had a passion for fashion and new ideas. She discarded old clothes, old conventional fashions, customs and ceremonies. Alice Meynell was a Victorian poetess. She wrote essays in the famous "*Pall Mall Gazette*" describing the miserable condition of the "Victorian women were both allured by, and afraid of, recent innovations in women's roles." (Talia Schaffer 14). Meynell wrote her famous essay "*The Color of Life*" in which she expresses the excitement and the terror of exposing herself to the urban crowd.

New Women In Fiction Of Twentieth Century Fiction

The British and American society after World War 1 witnessed new changes as Woman Question got new turn. The early decades of the 20th century were a battleground for women, with key gains made in political and legal reform. As fashions grew simpler and skirts rose higher, reaching knee-length by the late 1920s, women found new physical freedoms –sexual freedom deconstructing all cultural hierarchies. Scott Fitzgerald known as the writer of the Jazz age presented liberated young women characters who lived and enjoyed the Jazz age. His women characters are flappers, women who are passionate in taking all liberties scrapping all rules and conventions. Rosalind of "*This Side of Paradise*" (1920) Josphine of "*The Great Gatsby*" (1925), Gloria of "*The Beautiful and Damned*" (1922), and Rosemary of "*Tender is the Night*"- all these heroines are bold and passionate. Fitzgerald was a major force in changing the role of a woman in society. When Mrs. Virginia Woolf started writing novels, many changes had taken place in the art of novel writing. She had been influenced by the new technique of Stream of Consciousness which James Joyce experimented in his novels. All the psychological theories propounded by Freud and Jung influenced D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf was not an exception. James Joyce's "*Ulysses*", "Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*" and "*Lady Chatterley's Lover*" greatly influenced Virginia Woolf because these novels explored the inner world of the women. Women modernists like Dorothy Richardson, Gertude Stein, May Sinclair, Mina Loy and D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf display a range of formal novel strategies in dealing with their female subjects.

II. Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that various social, political and economic factors led to the emergence of New Woman in 19th century but this image of new woman never remained static rather it kept on assuming various forms and shades over the time. Where the New Woman of 19th century was daring, fashionable, educated, passionate to change everything and took sexual liberties too, the New Woman of the twentieth century was a rational, contradictory character, introvert and caught in the web of conflicts and tensions. Talking about 21st century, one can see that the thoughts and movements of western feminists and their representations of their female subjects have also some impact on the women of emerging countries like India. The feminism that is present today in India has extended beyond its western counterpart. "Third world feminism is not a mindless mimicking of Western Agenda in one clear and simple sense. Indian Feminist is clearly a response to the issues related to Indian women." (Nayantara 243).

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