

RESEARCH ARTICLE



EXPLORING THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF WESTERN FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

The history of Feminism in the world of literature, includes in its gamut, the women, from all spheres, speaking their own voices and sketching their own portrayals while taking and holding a pen. This movement marked a resentment towards the misrepresentation of women at the hands of men thus belittling the former to mere objects. Feminism retrieves the subject position of women by placing her at the center. 15th century witnessed the outset of feminism on the religious grounds, but as the 18th century wore on, the literary achievements of feminism began to be claimed. William Thompson and John Stuart Mill, the two male writers, pleaded the case and favoured feminism through their works. The paper analyzes feminism during the earlier times when women claimed their position within the religious frameworks.

Keywords: Feminism, Women, Religion.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the term “feminism” was first used in the latter part of the 19th century and it was defined as having the “qualities of females.” The meaning of the term has been gradually transformed and the 20th century dictionary definition of feminism is a “theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.” In the introduction to *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism*, Barbara Berg defines feminism as a “broad movement embracing numerous phases of woman’s emancipation.” She further writes:

It is the freedom to decide her own identity; freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely to

actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman’s right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that woman’s essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life (24).

It was on the religious grounds, that the seeds of feminism began to sprout, as the first European women spoke about their own selves within a religious framework. All over Europe, people sent their unmarried daughters to convents which, however, did not hinder the intellectual development of those women. Hildegard of Bingen, has long been known as an impressive writer who went on preaching tours all through the German empire even though only priests were allowed to preach that time. Julian of Norwich in the early 15th

century asked, 'Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God...?' Margaret Kemp produced an account of her own life that has been described as the first autobiography in English. 16th century witnessed a drastic change in the form of reformation that enabled more women to receive education. In 1589, Jane Anger took up a challenging position by insisting that Eve was superior to Adam: a second, and hence improved, model. This has been called as 'the earliest piece of English feminist polemic'. Whereas Adam was fashioned from 'dross and filthy clay', God made Eve from Adam's flesh, that she might be purer than he', which 'doth evidently show how far we women are more excellent than men . . . From woman sprang man's salvation.' This certainly was not easy as women, those times, had to face various false scriptural images like Delilah was treacherous, Jezebel murderous, while Eve was directly responsible for the fall of the human race.

In 1611, Amelia Lanyer remarked that Christ

was begotten of a woman, born of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman... he healed women, pardoned women, comforted women... after his resurrection appeared first to a woman.

In a tract called *Women's Speaking Justified*, Margaret Fell argued: "Those that speak against... the spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply by reason of her sex . . . speak against Christ and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent". England in the 17th century also witnessed that women were tried for witchcraft and female prophets were dismissed as crazy. Feminism on the religious grounds was thrust upon the affirmation of spiritual equality and less on natural rights.

A 17th century female author once remarked, "I am a very weak and unworthy woman. . . I could do no more of myself than a pencil or pen can do when no hand guides it." Queen Elizabeth though she made a sharp distinction between her role as a woman and as a monarch, but it helped in encouraging some Englishwomen to accept their own 'unfeminine' ambition. Anne Bradstreet wrote after 40 years of the Queen's death;

Let such as say our sex is void of reason

Know 'tis a slander now, but once was Treason.

An anonymous work entitled *The Woman's Sharp Revenge* (1640) argued that women's exclusion from learning was 'devised by men to secure their own continued domination.' Bathsua Makin, a governess to the daughter of Charles I, wrote in her *Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewoman in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues* on the

importance of education for women. 'Let women be fools and you will make them slaves.' The Civil War also paved the way for the importance of the women's role as they 'defended their houses and did all things, as soldiers with prudence and valour, like men'. Women took care of their homes without their husbands and struggled bravely to defend their families.

Christine de Pizan has been hailed as the first Western woman to live by her pen. Her most famous work, *The City of Ladies* (1404) criticizes learned books that spread 'so many wicked insults about women and their behaviour'; three allegorical women – Reason, Rectitude and Justice – discuss the roots of misogyny. "The man or the woman in whom resides greater virtue is the higher, neither the loftiness nor the lowliness of a person lies in the body, according to the sex, but in the perfection of conduct and virtues."

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, though being a royalist woman, wrote about women's common fears and griefs. Writing, as per her, was a 'harmlesst pastime' and far better than mere gossiping. In her 1655 *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, she argued that

We are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not suffered to fly abroad... we are shut out of all power and authority, by reason we are never employed either in civil or martial affairs, our counsels are despised and laughed at, the best of our actions are trodden down with scorn, by the overpowering conceit men have of themselves and through desipement of us.

Certain unexpected opportunities were provided for women; they worked as actresses, but they were often ill treated and considered as prostitutes. In addition to this, many women emerged as playwrights: Catherine Trotter, Mary Manley, and Mary Pix all of whom had produced certain plays. Aphra Behn is one of those women who had the temerity of breaking the boundaries and face the jeering criticism. She was a skilful dramatist, but came across a lot of criticism to which she eloquently replies:

"Had the plays writ come forth under any man's name, and never known to have been mine; I appeal to all unbiased judges of sense if they had not said that person had made as good comedians, as any one man that has writ in our age; but a devil on't the woman damns the poet . . . I value fame as much as if I had been born a hero."

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