

## Postfeminism : An Evolving Theoretical Paradigm

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### Abstract

Postfeminism is an evolving critical and theoretical paradigm which has originated in the last decade of the twentieth century. Even though a relatively new proposition, it has gained currency in the literary and cultural discourse of our times. Critics are divided on the nature of Postfeminism. Some see it as modification and continuation of feminist thought while others regard it as its repudiation. The term postfeminist was used by the noted critic Toril Moi for the first time in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). It was a reaction to the second wave feminism which was typically 'White, Straight and Liberal' in its approach. Since then, many new dimensions of postfeminism have emerged. Feminism is seen as a political stance, female as a biological entity and feminine as a cultural construct. Some features of postfeminism have also been seen as neo-conservative in approach. There are contradictions and paradoxes in treating postfeminism as a theory independent of feminism as both are linked inextricably. We are yet to hear the last word on the relationship between the two theories. This paper seeks to analyse the evolution of postfeminist thought and come up with a consolidated documentation of what the postfeminist movement actually stands for.

**Key Words** : Postfeminism, Feminism, Feminine, Female, Toril Moi.

Postfeminism is a recent development in theory. As is evident from the term, the postfeminist paradigm is a move beyond feminism. Of late, critics have been arguing for postfeminist poetics and the need to see beyond feminism. One would wonder as to what exactly has gone wrong with feminism! What has changed in the recent decades for philosophers and critics to come up with a new theory that interrogates and seeks to modify feminism? What is postfeminist theory and does it give a satisfactory solution to the problems faced by the women

all over the world? These are pertinent questions that need to be answered. Therefore, defining feminism and recounting the evolution of the feminist movement would not be irrelevant here.

The term feminism can be applied to the approach that seeks to bring social, political and economic equality for women with men. Feminism has come to be seen as a political stance.

“The words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s. 'Feminist criticism', then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature...” [Moi, “Feminist, Female, Feminine”, 117]

Feminist movement has been explained in terms of ‘waves’. First wave of feminism was mainly about suffrage for women, equal opportunities at the socio-political level and ensuring sound legal provisions in this regard. The period of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century can be regarded as the one corresponding to the first wave of feminism. The first wave of feminism was influenced by the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller etc. The Second wave of feminism broadened the field of work for the feminists and took up the matters of de facto equality of women, challenging patriarchy, discussing sexuality and the role of women in the family, divorce, abortion laws etc. The second wave of feminism was based on the theorizing by Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan etc. and lasted for about a couple of decades (1960s and 1970s). The third wave of feminism which took shape in the 1990s sees intersectionality as one of its key features. Intersectionality refers to the understanding that women have suffered from complex and multi-layered exploitation and it takes into account the dynamics of race and class along with gender. The writings of Rebecca Walker of the United States have founded the frontiers of the third wave of feminism. Sex positivity and eco-feminism constitute the added dimensions of the third wave of feminism. The fourth wave is the latest one to have emerged on the scene as the world goes global and digital, with social media and ‘hashtag’ trends setting the tone for struggle for equality. Trends like ‘#metoo’ have been mighty effective in exposing the sexual exploitation being faced by the

women at workplaces. This being said, it must also be remembered that the social media trends have limited utility of bringing the offence to light. Justice on the ground has not been served to most of the 'survivors'.

Feminism has come under attack from various quarters for not being accommodative of the diversity of the 'feminine' consciousness. Many intellectuals, most of them women, have come forward to express their dissatisfaction with feminism. Doris Lessings, a major novelist and a Nobel laureate, is a case in point. Even in our daily lives, we see women believing in the ideas of equality with men but being reticent about openly being a feminist. Recently, a research was commissioned by the BBC to enquire into the condition of feminism in the UK, USA and Germany. The excerpt below is from that research :

“A study of 27,000 people in the US found that two-thirds believed in gender equality in 2016, up from a quarter in 1977. And in a 2017 UK poll, 8% said they agreed with traditional gender roles - that a man should earn money and a woman should stay at home - down from 43% in 1984. If many believe gender equality is important, and still lacking, then why do relatively few people - including young women - identify as feminist? Having interviewed a diverse group of young German and British women for my research, I found associations of the term "feminism" with man-hating, lesbianism or lack of femininity was a key factor in rejections of the label "feminist". The majority said they did not want to call themselves feminist because they feared they would be associated with these traits. This was despite many stressing they were not homophobic and some identifying as lesbian or bisexual.” [Scharff, 2019]

It is in this backdrop that postfeminism is being discussed as the new theoretical paradigm. Almost contemporaneous with the third wave of feminism, postfeminism was being theorized.

“For the sake of periodisation, we could say that 1990 (or thereabouts) marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory. At this time the representational claims of second wave feminism come to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminists like Spivak,

Trinh, and Mohanty among others, and by feminist theorists like Butler and Haraway who inaugurate the radical de-naturalising of the post-feminist body (Judith Butler 1990; Donna Haraway 1991; Chandra T. Mohanty 1995; Gayatri Spivak 1988; T. Minha Trinh 1989).” [McRobbie, 256]

In its approach, postfeminism does not entirely repudiate feminism, but seeks to modify it. The noted critic, Toril Moi published her seminal work *Textual/Sexual Politics* in 1985 and expatiated her views in another book, *What is a Woman* published in 1991. In her works, she uses the term postfeminism to discuss an ideology which believes that much ground has been covered by feminism in bringing about political and socio-economic equality of women with men. However, a lot more needs to be done. In order for that to happen, it is necessary to move on from the concept of feminism is required. Moi differentiates between feminism, femaleness and femininity succinctly:

“I will suggest that we distinguish between 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics.” [Moi, 119]

Postfeminism looks beyond feminism. Feminism, Moi argues, perpetuates binaries. For example, feminist thought itself has been divided into binaries of liberal feminism and radical feminism or for that matter Anglo-American and French Feminism. What she proposes is a more nuanced approach which takes into account the experiences of women from other cultures and class. Here considerable similarity between postfeminism and fourth wave of feminism’s concept of intersectionality is found.

She further goes on to argue that it is possible to be a feminine critic without being a feminist critic.

“...the field of feminist criticism and theory today could helpfully be divided into two main categories: 'female' criticism and 'feminine' theory. 'Female' criticism, which per se only means

criticism which in some way focuses on women, may then be analysed according to whether it is feminist or not, whether it takes female to mean feminist, or whether it conflates female with feminine. The apolitical study of female authors is obviously not in itself feminist: it could very well just be an approach which reduces women to the status of interesting scientific objects on a par with insects or nuclear particles. It is nevertheless important to stress that in a male-dominated context an interest in women writers must objectively be considered a support for the feminist project of making women visible. This would of course not be true for obviously sexist research on women. It is in other words possible to be a 'female' critic without necessarily being a feminist one." [Moi

The feminist urge for having a distinct poetics of their own is problematic. Feminist thought has been the beneficiary of much of the poststructuralist theorizing done by males. Moi observes:

"Given the feminist insistence on the dominant and pervasive nature of patriarchal power so far in history, feminists have to be pluralists: (There is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak. All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology)'. There is thus no reason to hide the fact that Mary Wollstonecraft was inspired by the male-dominated ideas of The French Revolution, or that Simone de Beauvoir was deeply influenced by Sartre's phallogocentric categories when she wrote *The Second Sex*. Nor is it necessary to refuse to recognise John Stuart Mill's efforts to analyse the oppression of women simply because he was a male liberal. The point is not the origins of an idea (no provenance is pure), but the use to which it is put and the effects it can produce." [Moi, 117-118]

Another fault that she finds with some approaches of feminism is that they tend to see women as the victims. While patriarchy has no doubt let the women down, it is not as if none have raised their voices against it. So the feminist idea of total victimization of the female is flawed. It fails to see the successes that women have achieved in various cultures.

“...it casts women as eternal victims of male ploys. While it is true that many women have been victimised intellectually, emotionally-and physically by men; it is also true that some have managed efficiently to counter male power.” [Moi, 119]

The sex-gender dichotomy traditionally upheld by the feminists also comes under scrutiny. Toril Moi believes that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are English words, while French and Norwegian words have only one word for the purpose ( ‘sexe’ in French and ‘kjonne’ in Norwegian). She argues that the distinction that sex is biological differentiation between male and female while gender is a cultural construct is a feminist anxiety to counter biological determinism. The sex-gender dichotomy is not useful in carving out a “concrete and historical understanding of what it means to be a woman.” [Moi, *What is a Woman*, 4] This has led to the normative fallacy in Feminist theory.

“Because contemporary English language critics have read Beauvoir’s 1949 essay through the lens of 1960s sex/gender distinction, they have failed to see that her essay provides exactly the kind of non-essentialist, concrete, historical and social understanding of the body that so many contemporary feminists are looking at. In short, Beauvoir’s claim that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ has been sorely misunderstood by contemporary feminists.” [Moi, *What is a Woman*, 5]

Moi argues that to see feminism as an indispensable corollary to feminine writing is basically a flawed assumption. The ‘feminine’ is a culturally produced state which perpetuates the position of marginality of female writing that patriarchy desires. Unless the binary of masculine and feminine is dispensed with, the oppression of patriarchy will continue. A possible interpretation of this position can also include the experiences of transgenders and Queer people within the ambit of postfeminism. Critics like Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon see postfeminist theory as a fluid entity. They believe that there is considerable overlapping between Postfeminism and the third wave feminism:

“Postfeminism is a concept fraught with contradictions. Loathed by some and celebrated by others, it emerged in the late twentieth century in a number of cultural, academic and political contexts, from popular journalism and media to feminist analyses, postmodern theories and neo-liberal rhetoric. Critics have claimed and appropriated the term for a variety of definitions, ranging from a conservative backlash, Girl Power, third wave feminism and postmodern/poststructuralist feminism.” [Grenz & Brabon]

Other critics like Angela McRobbie believe that postfeminism corresponds to a neo-conservative value system in relation to gender, sexuality and family life. From the point of view of Indian philosophy, it can be said that postfeminism supports the concept of androgyny, which comes very close to the Indian concept of the ‘*Ardhnarishwara*’, a state of not only equality and indispensability of man and woman for a fulfilling life but also one that ensures the equity of both the sexes in having better lives with the ability to exercise their choice.

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