



Feminism in Transition - Evolution, Intersectionality and the Indian Experience

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Abstract

Feminism has developed from the traditional wave model of gender inequality into a more inclusive and broader framework that acknowledges the interconnected nature of gendered oppression and discrimination. Early feminist waves prioritised the lived realities of occidental white, middle-class women, a limitation strongly criticised by marginalized and Black feminists who highlighted the reductionist accounts of oppression. Broadening the Black and marginalized viewpoint, Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" reshaped the field of feminism by introducing intersectionality as a critical framework for analysing the interconnected dynamics of power and oppression. The emergence of intersectionality showcased the overlapping structures of race, gender, caste, class, social status, sexuality, and colonial power, to name a few. This article scrutinizes the advancement of feminist thought from the singular and linear model of representing white middle-class women to the emergence of intersectionality, accentuating the revolutionary role of Black and marginalized feminist writers and activists. The article further analyses the impact of theoretical transition on feminist literary criticism by encouraging a more inclusive reading of literary works centered on marginalized voices and intersecting identities. In the Indian scenario, feminist thought also evolved from social and legal rights to a more inclusive engagement with social structures, caste, class, religion, tribal identity, regional disparities and sexuality. The article ultimately argues that intersectionality has defined contemporary feminist discourse and literary studies, enabling more nuanced understandings of lived experiences, identities, and resistance across varied cultural and historical contexts.

Keywords - feminism, literary theory, waves of feminism, black feminism, Indian feminism, intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

Feminism, continually reshaped over centuries, combines socio-political, economic, and intellectual efforts to advance gender equality and to transform life with dignity and opportunity for all. Initially starting among a small group of self-aware white middle-class women, it steadily became a fully-fledged movement. Though the inception of feminist thought took place in the 15th century itself, it emerged as an organised movement in the late nineteenth century only. The different phases of feminism are often categorised into different waves. The word 'waves' was first used by the journalist Martha Weinman Lear in her 1968 New York Times article The Second Feminist Wave. She conveyed that women's freedom struggle was another "new chapter in a grand history of women fighting together for their rights".



Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is one of the first recognised feminist texts, which strongly defended women's freedom, gender equality and self-awareness through education and equal opportunities. After the dormant eighteenth century, the feminist movement gained traction in the nineteenth century in Europe and America, with a primary emphasis on women's political participation, property rights, educational advancements and legal equality. This period is generally regarded as the First Wave of Feminism.

Through the centuries, feminism evolved through different stages, generally denoted as waves. Each wave reflected contemporary realities of the era and addressed changing needs and experiences of women. The second wave, which gained traction in the 1960s, broadened the scope of feminism beyond legal reforms to workplace gender inequality, reproductive autonomy, sexual liberation and domestic oppression. The third wave gathered pace in the 1990s, with greater emphasis on individuality, diversity and intersectionality, recognising that women's identity is influenced by experiences based on race, caste, class and sexuality. Contemporary fourth-wave feminism is connected to social media campaigns, digital activism, and the struggle against sexual harassment and gender violence.

In India, feminist consciousness can be traced to the nineteenth-century social reform movement led by Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, to name a few. They sought to dismantle the sati system, child marriage and the denial of women's education. In modern times, Indian feminism diversified and addressed issues of intersectionality, acknowledging the fact that caste, class, race, and sexual orientation influence women's lived experiences.

RESEARCH GAP:

Although women's writing about women can be traced back to ancient Greece through the works of Sappho around 630 BCE, feminism as an organised movement emerged again in 15th-century France. But it was only in the eighteenth century that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* became a turning point in the feminist movement, as it advocated for equal education and opportunities for women. Finally, in the nineteenth century, the feminist movement gained traction all over the world with a focus on legal rights and girls' education, but it mainly focused on white middle-class women. Slowly, feminism widened its focus by including other sections of marginalized women and the third gender through intersectionality. Much research has been done in the field of feminism, but most of it discusses only the four waves of feminism. The feminist thoughts of marginalized women like Dalit, Black, and third gender remain largely overlooked. This article tries to trace the complete evolution of feminism from the first wave to the fourth wave, along with Third World Feminism, Black Feminism, Indian feminism, and intersectionality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory by Hela Mornagul examines feminist thought in the intellectual field and also as a political project. The work introduces liberal, radical, Marxist,

psychoanalytic, poststructuralist intersections of gender with race, class, and contemporary topics such as identity, subjectivity, and resistance strategies.

Nausheen Ishaque's "[De] Constructing the Feminine: Addressing the Postmodern Feminist Syndrome" represents post-feminism as challenging patriarchy by rejecting male-made universal truths, fixed gender roles and male-centered hierarchies. The writer opines that women lose their identity, which is needed for collective struggle and social action.

Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* discusses post-feminism, media culture and feminist politics in modern society. The writer argues that feminism has been absorbed into a post-feminist culture that celebrates women's "freedom" while quietly restoring older gender norms.

In Helen Schwenken's "We'll be Post-Feminists in Post-Patriarchy," the author explores the relationship between feminist theory and political practice, highlighting the gap between academic debates and the realities of feminist activism. Schwenken argues that the language of post-feminism can sometimes mask the persistence of patriarchal structures instead of reflecting genuine gender equality. By emphasizing that patriarchy continues to shape women's lives, the article presents feminism as an ongoing political movement rather than a completed historical phase. This perspective makes the work particularly valuable for understanding post-feminism, feminist strategies, and the connection between feminist theory and activism.

"Feminist movements and discourses that exceed merely demanding equality by proposing profound structural transformations and political strategies".

Other Feminisms: A Subversive Gift to the World By Firoozeh Farvardin

Intersectionality is the emotional and intellectual evolution of feminism from the first wave to the third wave. It is a combination of all the aspects that were missing in the previous waves, such as the social, economic, racial and cultural dimensions of marginalized women and the third gender. Intersectionality can also be referred to as 'other feminism', as it represents intersectional populations and territories of the marginalized. Contemporary feminism based on intersectionality and digital activism deals with violence in the home, public places, moral policing based on attire and attitude, femicide and international oppression of women, queer and trans people.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK -

This article substantiates the critical feminist paradigm, which considers gender as historically conditioned, socially produced and politically challenged. It explores how literature, especially novels, shapes ideas of femininity, power, resistance, and subjectivity through language, representation, and institutional norms. Instead of assuming gender as a fixed identity, this framework treats it as something produced by repeated discursive practices, shaped by culture, ideology, and power relations.

The critical analysis helps to decipher the ways in which texts create and propagate the idea of what a woman is, what is meant by feminine freedom, what her choice should be based on tradition and how empowerment can be achieved. Instead of treating the patriarchal norms as universal and fixed, the article tries to evaluate how they are shaped by language. Moreover, the language and the ideas have developed over time, as the meanings are culturally and historically produced rather than being permanent. From this standpoint, feminist ideas emerged, changed, were reshaped and were absorbed within different social and political contexts.

The key concepts guiding this article are Indian Feminism and intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, introduced the concept of intersectionality, opining that the oppression and discrimination experienced by Black women are shaped by the multilayered factors of race and sex. Based on this idea, this article explores how gender intersects with class, caste, race, religion, nationality and sexuality to shape identities, experiences and forms of resistance.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves." Mary Wollstonecraft

This famous and extraordinary line is from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). This canonical text strongly advocates women's emancipation, epistemic equality and self-awareness of one's capabilities rather than being merely objectified and dependent upon men. This cornerstone text became the foundation for the First wave of feminism which started from the mid-19th century. Though women's struggle for autonomy started in the 15th century itself, the first organised women's rights movement was the 1848 Seneca Fall Convention by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, leading to the Declaration of Sentiments. Other works which also contributed to the First wave of feminism were Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), interrogating medical control of women, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1898), exploring female sexuality and freedom. The first wave primarily focused on suffrage and legal rights of middle-class white women.

First-wave liberal feminism, which sought political and legal equality through reforms within a liberal democratic framework, was contrasted with labour-based proletarian women's movements that over time developed into socialist and Marxist feminism based on class struggle theory.

The shortcoming of the first wave is well described by abolitionist Sojourner Truth in her famous 1851 speech, 'Ain't I am Woman', describing the oppression of women of color in terms of ideological inconsistency. She pointed out the exclusion of women of color from the feminist movement's agenda.

In India, First-wave feminism also commenced from the mid-19th century with an emphasis on girls' education and customs. But feminism was initiated by Savitribai Phule in 1851 itself by starting a girls' school, followed by writers like Pandita Ramabai who deconstructed widowhood and caste, and Sarojini Naidu who advocated suffrage, to name a few.

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Simone de Beauvoir

This line from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) conveys the essence of the Second Wave of feminism. The second wave extended from the 1960s to the early 1980s, addressing reproductive rights or freedom by legalizing abortion, workplace equality and cultural norms about sexuality, drawing on psychoanalytic theory. The wave amplified "the personal is political" by reflecting upon broader societal expectations about gender roles and women's sexuality. Like the first wave, it also mainly focused on white middle-class women. The seminal text *The Second Sex* analyzed women as the 'other' in patriarchy. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) exposed housewife dissatisfaction and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) attacked sexual repression.

Radical feminism arose from the radical wing of the second wave and called for a radical reordering of society to eliminate patriarchy. Liberal, socialist, and radical feminism are sometimes referred to as the "Big Three" schools of feminist thought.

Black Feminism emerged from the 1970s onward as a critique of the second wave, highlighting "interlocking oppressions". It put forward complex and interconnected forms of oppression based on race, gender, class and sexuality. It also stressed self-definition and community kinship, and subverted racism. bell hooks and Audre Lorde exposed racism in white feminism, thus laying the groundwork for intersectionality.

Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a woman?* (1981) critiqued racism in literature. Alice Walker coined Womanism in "In Search of Our Mother's Garden" (1993), emphasizing Black women's creativity and humanism. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) formalized standpoint theory on Black women's knowledge.

Gynocriticism has been one of the important aspects of the second wave. The three important aspects of gynocriticism are investigating women writers' works and positions in literary history, examining the treatment of female characters in books and, most importantly, discovering and exploring literature written by women. Elaine Showalter instituted gynocriticism in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) by proposing three phases of women's writing. The first was the 'Feminine Phase', in which female writers not only followed male writing styles but also used male pseudonyms. In the second 'Feminist phase', female writers voiced their concerns about the role of women in society and oppression. The last 'Female phase' developed a distinctive female literary tradition through innovative language, form and style. It is defined as a period of self-discovery and creativity but lacked the wrath and belligerent critical consciousness of the feminist phase.

A theoretical evolution of the second wave of feminism is the concept of Abjection. Julia Kristeva introduced this concept in her book *Power of Horror* (1980). The theory of abjection explores the psychological aversion toward things that blur boundaries between the self, the conscious and the unconscious, such as life and death, bodily fluids, waste, and corpses. Abjection poses a threat to identity and a fear of being consumed by 'others' - the woman in patriarchy, and the abject

female and femininity are also considered unclear and repulsive. In the patriarchal society, the exclusion of females is a psychic defence for maintaining male identity and supremacy.

Third World Feminism is an offshoot of second-wave feminism. It emerged in the 1980s as a transnational, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist movement which dynamically critiqued the totalizing approach of Western feminism. Connected to the anti-colonial and independence struggle, it addressed intersectional oppression based upon race, class, colonialism and global capitalism. This framework stressed feminism rooted in local cultural and political realities of third world countries like Africa, Asia, Latin America rather than being imported from the West. Primarily rooted in local, post-colonial experiences and struggles against systemic oppression, third world feminism is championed by inclusivity policies.

Post-feminism emerges not as a grassroots movement but as a media-driven cultural ideology, overlapping with late second-wave and early third-wave feminist activism. At its core, it prioritizes individual agency and personal choice, often proclaiming that feminism's primary objectives—such as legal equality and workplace access—have largely been realized. It posits a "post-" era where formal barriers have crumbled, allowing women to reclaim pleasure in traditional gender roles without guilt. Yet this framework sidelines deeper interrogations of enduring structural inequalities, such as class divides or racial disparities, by framing empowerment as a personal marketplace transaction rather than a communal struggle.

In India, the Second Wave of Feminism showed progressive advancements in the 1970s and 80s. The wave was fuelled by the enthusiasm of the women who played an integral part in the independence movement. The focus shifted from the legal rights of the First wave to deconstructing historically embedded patriarchy, oppression of women through systemic violence and economic disparity. Strengthened by public-led campaigns, the second wave underscored problems like occupational bias, dowry and physical as well as emotional and sexual atrocities against rural and urban women.

Some of the prominent Indian feminist writers and works of the second wave are Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* (1942) which defied norms of sexuality and women, Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marajani* (1966) exploring female desire boldly, Mahasweta Devi's *Bayen* (1976) presenting the oppression due to rigid rules of the society and many more.

"I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave". Rebecca Walker

These lines by Rebecca Walker initiated the Third Wave of Feminism by advocating for the transformation of ferocity and agitation into de facto political power for equality for all genders. The third wave of feminism came into force from the mid-1990s and extended into the 2010s. This wave emphasised diversity, individualism and sexuality. The second wave concentrated on big group issues and fights, ignoring individual life experiences, whereas the third wave extolled personal choice and power. Each woman could delineate feminism according to her outlook in a world where media has become saturated with made-up images and changing cultural dynamics.

Third Wave also accentuated intersectionality along with personal agency and the reclamation of femininity.

Intersectionality, the bedrock of the third wave of feminism, addresses the limitations of prior waves which focused upon white middle-class women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined "intersectionality" in 1989, aligning with the third wave's emergence, to show overlapping oppressions of gender with race, class, sexuality and other identities. Intersectionality acknowledged the 'Matrix of domination' as defined by Patricia Hill Collins, encouraging pluralism and heterogeneity while dismantling the uniform and monolithic concept of womanhood. It enhanced the third wave by embracing sex positivity, rejecting the stigmatization of victims and forging alliances between feminism and wider equality struggles such as anti-racism and anti-classism, to name a few.

Intersectionality contributed to the development of the third wave by embracing sex positivity, challenging victim-blaming narratives, and aligning feminist discourse with broader equality movements such as anti-racism and anti-classism. The third wave provoked strong criticism for feminists' sexualized behaviour and questioned whether it truly represented gender equality and sexual liberation or whether it disguised old oppressions.

Third-wave feminism in India emerged during the 1990s by moving beyond legal equality and education of the previous waves to the intersection of gender with caste, class, religion, sexuality, region, and ethnicity, alongside economic liberalization, globalization, and the increasing visibility of marginalized identities. Based on Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Indian feminists highlighted diverse realities of women across the country. This period also witnessed the growth of Dalit feminism, queer activism, digital campaigns, and grassroots movements that questioned both patriarchal and caste-based oppression. Although more plural, flexible and critical of fixed categories, it has faced criticism for uneven visibility and for struggling to reach all sections of society equally. Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life* (2008) offers a powerful account of Dalit womanhood. Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012) redefined feminism for contemporary India by addressing issues such as sexuality, identity, and state power.

"Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength" G. D. Anderson

This quote by G.D Anderson defines the Fourth Wave of Feminism. The fourth wave is commonly described as a counter-reaction to post-feminist rhetoric that asserted that gender parity had been achieved because women possess freedom and choice, and that empowerment can be articulated through consumer culture based upon beauty as well as fashion industries and sexual orientation.

The fourth wave of feminism is the ongoing feminist struggle. It emerged in the early 2010s, often dated to around 2012 - 2013, and highlighted initiatives like the Everyday Sexism Project and Hollanack campaigns, finally attaining momentum through #MeToo in 2017, #TimeUp,



#NotOkay, to name a few. It continues with an emphasis on digital media, intersectionality, sexual harassment, body shaming, rape culture and online misogyny. The fourth wave is manifested as “digital or online feminism”, as it is shaped by mass online mobilisation and new communication technologies.

The fourth wave is based on the third wave of intersectionality and emphasizes factors like race, class, caste, disability, sexuality, and transgender identity. The movement deliberately embraced LGBTQIA++ communities, people of colour and other marginalized groups instead of being exclusively for white, middle-class women.

Technological advancements in online mobilisation have led to increased global connectivity, which in turn has resulted in many sensational demonstrations on streets for justice. The core issues dealt with are sexual harassment and assault in the workplace, on campus and in public spaces, and also online. The fourth wave also raised its voice for those who were sexually assaulted and fought against rape culture as well as victim-blaming. Modernisation has set unrealistic beauty standards leading to body shaming, while the present wave emphasizes body positivity. But the technological advancements have also resulted in online misogyny and cyber-harassment, specifically gender-based violence and femicide.

Notable fourth-wave feminists include Roxane Gay, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tarana Burke, Laura Bates, Jessica Valenti, Rebecca Solnit, to name a few. Gay’s *Bad Feminist* (2014) defines feminism by exploring its imperfections and inclusivity across class, race and identity. Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminist* (2014) supported intersectional feminism popularized online. Laura Bates initiated the Everyday Sexism Project by compiling digital testimonies on harassment, influencing global conversations.

Fourth-wave Indian feminists supported digital movements like #WhyLoiter and post-2012 anti-rape activism, while prioritising urban misogyny and intersectionality. Indian feminists include Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Geetanjali Shree, to name a few. Desai’s *Rosarita* (2024) explores post-colonial themes like memory, identity and exile. Kapur’s *The Gallery* (2023) scrutinizes the themes of womanhood, marriage, and sexual freedom in contemporary society. Shree’s International Booker Prize-winning *Tomb of Sand* (2023) portrays the lived experience of an elderly woman against the backdrop of a partition narrative.

Feminism has undergone drastic changes from its inception to the present. Modern feminism combines intellectual thinking and political practices and its outcomes and critiques demonstrate a movement which is not only capacious but also contested. Contemporary feminism with its holistic activism connects lived experience, cultural production, and public policy. Literary works from across the globe portray ground realities through everyday language; for example, bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* traces the grassroots causes of Black women’s oppression. Hooks criticizes even the Black Nationalist movement for not supporting Black women’s struggle.

Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* explores how sexism is embedded in everyday life, politics, workplace, media, and family relationships. Steinem argues that women are often limited by social expectations and unequal power structures rather than by their abilities. She calls for changes in laws, institutions, and cultural attitudes so that women can enjoy equal opportunities and freedom.

Feminism also tried to discover historically suppressed voices of black and marginalized women. Feminist criticism has resisted the supremacy of male-authored doctrines. This method made literature more inclusive by interpreting history and culture from a feminine perspective. Modern feminism also accentuates intersectionality by emphasizing that women from different places experience different forms of oppression based on race, caste, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality and disability. Such viewpoints encourage the analysis of subtle shades of oppression and resistance by preventing the experiences of privileged groups from being standardised.

In spite of all the success attributed to feminism, it is not devoid of criticism either. The most important debate in contemporary feminism is the question of inclusivity. According to some critics, feminism historically focused on the experiences of white middle-class, heterosexual, or cisgender women while neglecting marginalized communities. This thought process led to the inception of intersectional feminism which acknowledges all forms of oppression and discrimination. Nevertheless, the question still remains as to the extent to which feminist movements' inclusivity has succeeded in representing the diversity of women's lived experiences across different racial, social, cultural and gender contexts.

CONCLUSION

The feminist trajectory demonstrates that it is not a single or fixed ideology but a plural, dynamic, contested and ever-evolving political and intellectual movement. From its early focus on political demands such as suffrage, legal equality and reproductive rights, to its contemporary engagement with intersectionality, feminism has enlarged its purview to encompass the multiple and interconnected forms of oppression based on caste, race, societal status, colour and sexuality experienced by women. With the inclusivity offered by intersectionality, radical critiques by marginalized women, such as Black and Dalit women, and concepts from post-colonial scholars, such as the subaltern, confirm that understanding gendered oppression in isolation is impossible. Feminism evolved from treating women as a monolithic, homogeneous group to an analytical and praxis-oriented pluralism, with a nuanced and inclusive framework by amplifying the voices of previously marginalized groups and attending to local histories, structural violence and lived realities.

Feminist pluralism is an epistemic enrichment as multiple feminisms such as queer, indigenous, Marxist, ecofeminism, trans, Dalit, lesbian, etc., challenge universalist claims and produce situated knowledge. All types of feminism emphasize that emancipation will happen when patriarchal gender norms are destroyed along with patriarchal domination, capitalism, caste hierarchies and globalizing labor regimes. Over the centuries, feminist scholarship has kept renewing itself through interdisciplinary methods, participatory research, and narrative practices

that center testimony, affect, and embodiment alongside theory. In spite of all the advancements, feminism still faces many challenges like inclusivity, representation and the relationship between theory and activism. Feminism's commitment is to critically reflect on its own assumptions, transformation and growth.

In the modern digital and AI age, feminists are investigating issues such as online abuse, doxxing, cyber-misogyny, algorithmic bias, digital surveillance, unequal access to technology, and the ethical implications of AI for women and marginalized communities. Feminism helps societies undergoing change to understand inequality, to challenge power systems, and to form more inclusive and equitable futures. Its enduring strength lies in its ability to question established assumptions while adapting to the evolving realities of a diverse and interconnected world.

In the Indian context, feminism has moved beyond oriental presumption about women's lived realities to acknowledge the country's social and cultural diversity. Women's lived experiences are influenced by intersecting factors such as caste discrimination, religious identity, rural neglect, economic and regional disadvantage. Contemporary Indian literature portrays modern Indian women as transformed individuals who negotiate identity, agency, family, and social expectations in complex and often contradictory ways, not as passive victims who accept everything silently, but as active, dynamic and complex individuals.

An inclusive and future-oriented feminism must remain responsive to the changing realities of society with solidarities rooted in the everyday struggles of all women across all communities and societies. Contemporary feminism must collaborate with all liberating movements and campaigns like labour movements, queer movements, anti-caste campaigns, eco justice coalitions and technological innovation for equity. Comparable in importance is the continual commitment to amplifying marginalized voices, promoting collaborative production of knowledge, and critically questioning power systems that sustain inequality and discrimination. In the modern technological and digital world, feminists must be aware of new modes of digital violence like doxing, cyberbullying, and digital blackmail, which can lead to surveillance, exclusion and gender-based violence. By keeping social realities, justice and human dignity as pivotal to the mainstream discussion, feminism can continuously serve not only as a framework for analysing social structure but also as a transformative force for forming a more inclusive, equitable and empathetic future.

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