

## THE FEMINIST KULTURKAMPF: HAVE WE REALLY TRANSCENDED THE FIRST WAVE?

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**Abstract:** In the contemporary Feminist research paradigm the works and literature of feminist icon Mary Wollstonecraft had somehow passed into obscurity. Her works are seen as either radical only for her time since society has progressed greatly since the 18<sup>th</sup> century or her focus is seen as too narrow, limited only to the public education of women. This paper attempts to engage with the ideas and works of Wollstonecraft from a viewpoint which considers her work to be more relevant than ever. Wollstonecraft's views on virtue, morality, masculinity, power, independence, and reason/emotion are extremely relevant to the issues that seem to most engage feminists and their adversaries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – both at the policy level and general culture. The debate on safe spaces, trigger warnings, child rearing, and Alimony and divorce laws has created significant differences of opinion within feminists. This paper suggests that a critical and more serious engagement with Wollstonecraft may paradoxically offer a new paradigm from which to debate and argue contemporary issues in the debate on feminism and women's rights. Along with Wollstonecraft the paper shall also engage with the works of feminist scholars such as Camille Paglia, Judith Butler, Carol Gilligan in order to contrast and highlight the radical nature of the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft.

**Introduction:** This paper seeks to explore the contemporary feminist culture war that is being ensued in much of the western world and also in developing countries such as India to some extent. This paper will first outline some of the key features of College Campus Feminism and Liberal Equity Feminism.

19<sup>th</sup> Century Feminism was surprisingly deeply imbued with a sense of cynicism to the idea of female nature, or the values associated therewith. It railed against the notion of 'sex' as an essential in nature. Rather the femininity of the time was seen as being based on contingent cultural factors rather than biology and hence amenable to analysis, critique and transformation. Femininity would be associated with sensitivity, delicacy, altruism, empathy, dependency, and weakness and hence more likely to be challenged, criticized and seen as a product of patriarchy than celebrated (1). Femininity was seen as the consequence of subjugated women accepting the norms and habits that men around them would set for them to accept and imbibe, much like how priests would create a value system to be imbibed by their followers. As such, early 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism was a product of the times in its stringent liberalism. 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal societies promoted and fostered societal values such as reason over emotions, abstract thought over concrete feeling, stoicism over self-expression, foresight over immediate gratification and adherence to universal law rather than idealism and utopianism. If the foregoing values were the ones which were seen as defining and supporting civilization and a liberal polity then early feminists were intrigued at the fact that it was only the male of the population that were trained in such values and encouraged to imbibe the same. The female of the population were almost as if held to a different

standard and not expected to uphold the same values. In fact the opposite was encouraged; the values that females were to imbibe were one of safety, sensitivity, emotionalism and altruistic selflessness. In other words, values that go hand in hand with being a sophisticated hostess or a house-keeper and care provider. It is this disjuncture that troubled Mary Wollstonecraft and she had decided that women were not only capable of the right to exercise their vote and also able active participants in all tasks in society, but also that the separation of roles and tasks have already cost society dearly (not just women) and is likely to cost even more in the future. Mary Wollstonecraft had very low regard for what was considered to be feminine values in her time. She compared Femininity to the values of the enthusiast soldier and thought it had the predisposition towards tyrannizing. Femininity had elevated flattery, social charms, elegance, and beauty above virtue, principles, sense of duty, independence and rational pursuit of truth. Consider the following words,

"I am aware of an obvious inference – from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardor in hunting, shooting and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues the exercise of which ennobles the character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind, all those who view them with a philosophical eye must, I should think, wish with me that they may every day grow more and more masculine." (2)

As Harriet Taylor Mill echoes in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a significant reason provided for barring

women from active political life was that such participation could have a hardening effect on the character of women. In other words, whereas the cruelties of the real world hardens the character of men, the womenfolk should be protected and kept away from the same troubles because society/men need their wives/mother/sisters to be unlike them. They would prefer the womenfolk to have soft sensitivities and fragile hearts because it is the same naive gentle graces that seem to most comfort the men after they have returned home from a hard day at the mine, factory, battlefield, parliament. Feminists of the time would argue that if such is the cost of equal participation then it is worth it. (3)

It is worth mentioning at this point that in India, liberal minded social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Pandita Ramabhai were much influenced by the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and used arguments similar to that of Wollstonecraft. One of those who were influenced is the very interesting Bengali Social reformer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. In her sci-fi futuristic story called 'Sultana's dream' she imagines what an enlightened humanistic society ruled by wise women of virtue could be like. In the narrative the women rulers of the Kingdom decide to fight a war instead of returning political refugees to a neighboring despotic Kingdom ruled by men. When the war seems to be not going their way and all militaristic means had failed, female students from the university put into use a scientific experiment they have been working on to concentrate the sun's rays on the enemy soldiers. The enlightened queen also happens to support free trade with all countries, albeit human rights (women's rights) prevent the kingdom from trading with a country that enslaves its women. Every aspect of the society is more efficiently governed by controlling nature through science and by mastering diverse fields such as botany, climatology, cultivation, transportation. Other inventions of the society included gravity controlling hydrogen balls, electric air-cars. (4)

In other words the story and the vision is an excellent reflection of the spirit of the times – Liberal Feminism.

These issues have come back with a vengeance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have gone through several combinations of conjectures about the male-female divide. There have been feminists who no longer shared the skepticism of early feminists towards femininity and have chosen to embrace it, seeing a certain kind of power in doing the same (5). We have had feminists who even refused to acknowledge the relevance of 'sex' as an epistemological entity (6). At present the position which seems to be the most widely prevalent and seems to be the strongest is the idea of the social construct – that sex and values

associated with it are impotent and irrelevant unless they are created and re-enforced by discourse and reiterative discourse. Much as Liberal and later Marxist Feminist was both the product of a given environment of ideas and time, present day college campus feminism is a product of certain elite post-ideological college campuses mostly in North America. Just as Liberal Feminism was quiet clearly an ally of mainstream Liberalism and individualism, College Campus Feminism is an ally of the radical left and collectivism. With regard to the theory of sex as a social construct it pre-dates the new feminism and is simply a tangential offshoot of the larger social constructionist theory in Social Science which had come into prominence since the late 60's (7). For instance in International Relations, the constructivist school makes a somewhat interesting and analogous argument – that war and conflict is not a natural consequence of human nature/game theory but a consequence of how human nature is itself interpreted by significant actors and decision makers (8). Analogously, a certain school in social science and gender studies had also made the argument that 'sex' by itself is incapable of influencing any outcome, rather it is our discourses or lack of it on the same subject that decides how and in what ways 'sex' as an ontological entity influences outcomes. Associated with this theory is the idea that individuals are free to identify themselves at will irrespective of their actual anatomical state. As such the debate on male and female values and masculinity and Femininity had been closed off in certain sectors of society and popular society. It would be one thing if such a sex discourse free world would have actually created a unisexual world but the reality is that such a discourse or non-discourse (political correctness) had in fact created an even more disjuncture/segregated world. Modern college campus feminists have proliferated ideas such as trigger warnings, micro aggressions and safe spaces. The values that undergird these concepts and movements are the same values that 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists had recognized as anathema to women's empowerment. It re-enforces the idea of women as vulnerable fragile beings, less capable of fully taking part in the public sphere without going through trauma and hurt feelings. Women (and men) are further encouraged to be sensitive, to be protection oriented, and to identify oneself as a victim at all times and employ emotional reasoning, according to some critics (9). The earlier feminist focus on participating and shaping the public sphere is by and large absent. Feminism until the late 1970's was much about forcefully entering the public sphere and fully participating in tasks which had until been regarded as masculine. One is here reminded of Katherine Switzer who sneaked her way into the Boston

marathon and completed the long distance run despite the organizers trying to get in her way (10). It was an extremely symbolic form of protest by participation. College campus feminism in contrast casts the public sphere as the ultimate manifestation of toxic masculinity/patriarchy and consequently attempts to transform the values of the public sphere with those private sphere values that they find more comforting and safe. Values such as stoicism, rationality, foresight, independence, competition are even more directly associated as privileged values (rich, white males) and consequently stigmatized or seen as archaic and humorously redundant and naive. Speech that one disagrees with is no longer seen as something that needs to be engaged and refuted with reason and deliberation. Instead students need to be protected from opposite uncomfortable views since they may be triggered. In case they are triggered they should be able to direct themselves to safe spaces.

It is rather odd and puzzling that the feminine mystique that Wollstonecraft had delineated rejected and denounced as being the most harmful to the progress of women is still so strong in contemporary western unisexual society. Men and women still differ extremely in their opinions, values, interests, preferences etc. in fact it is another sign of the times that challenging femininity and being skeptical about its attached values has become more controversial in today's world than in the world of a few decades past.

**The culture and ethic of safe spaces, trigger warnings and micro aggressions:** The safe space that is idealized and actualized by CCF is one where the individual would be emotionally safe rather than physically safe. The movement for the establishment of 'safe spaces' had first started in the Feminist webosphere/blogosphere (11). It has gained widespread popularity ever since and has become a key feature of several college campuses in recent years. Students might find a particular lecture, protest, speech triggering. For instance a person who had undergone abortion and had a traumatic experience going through it may be triggered when some person in class thoughtlessly and unawares happens to mention abortion in the middle of an argument or question. The former student would go through an intense range of emotions consisting of trauma, anxiety which can be termed as triggering. 'Safe spaces' are seen as a necessary option for such students to cope with such situations. So far the concept seems innocuous. But in recent years it has run into problems because particular courses (rape law) and lectures have had to be shelved because one or more student/s was likely to find the content

unsafe or triggering (12). Since it is impossible to a priori delineate all the possible words, concepts, topics, themes that could trigger a student and since the triggered student is considered to be the sole authority on her/his mental state it does not take too much to predict/foresee how the norm and ethic of safe spaces can be easily abused and misused by anyone at whim. Discussions on women's contraception rights could be terminated because it might trigger the wrong emotions in a catholic student. It is easy to imagine how feminists of an earlier generation would consider such movements and concepts to be regressive rather than progressive. Noted feminists have consistently argued that female nature has always been a product of male patriarchy – protection, control and coddling. Women would not be able to participate meaningfully and fully in the public sphere if it remained mired in the feminine mystique. The feminist movement also believes in safety, but it does not limit 'safety' to a certain space, as an act of compromise with the powers that be. Either the entire university is a safe space or it is not. There cannot be pockets of safety interrupted by larger spaces which are already deemed unsafe by default and surrendered to the enemy. The women's movement again stands at a junction where it is about to decide where feminism embraces femininity or opposes it or if femininity overwhelms feminism or a compromise between the two can be reached. If the argument is made that the world needs feminine values such as empathy, sensitivity and altruism as much as it needs masculine values of independence, rationality and aggressive competition then it is but a fair argument. But it will not remain a fair proposition if it is the women who take it upon themselves disproportionately the task of being empathic, kind, elegant and care-giving. In terms of balance of power, selective and natural advantages it can surely be predicted that if women were to take upon the inelegant manly tasks of competing, systemizing and public reasoning it will encourage and allow significant number of men to choose to be empathic, care-giving etc. this seems to be a much simpler and more straightforward route towards substantive equality between the sexes than creating limited and sanitized safe spaces. The values that we regard as male and the ones we regard as female are only regarded as such for purely accidental reasons. In certain species of birds, such as the Wattled Jacana of Panama it is the males which have adapted to the

role of nurturing the eggs and raising the children and it is the genetic females that hunt for food and fight over territory (13). Not surprisingly it is the males in this case that exhibit what we know to be (in a way erroneously) feminine characteristics of empathy, care-giving, relative pacifism etc and it is the females which are aggressive, competitive and possibly with greater spatial abilities. If we were to evaluate gender roles and sex and Darwinian evolution we would come to the conclusion that what we erroneously term as male values can be re-baptized as the public sphere values and female values can be re-phrased as the domestic sphere values. Among human beings, if we are to create a more equal society both the sexes will have to move almost simultaneously towards being more open towards the other sex's traditional role. Or even better, as humans we have greatly succeeded in diminishing the hard work involved in the domestic sphere of life (maids, washing machines, the pill, vacuum cleaner). Hence, in most cases women can in fact contribute fully to the public sphere without the male counterpart having to withdraw from the same in order to take up the domestic sphere. In other words cultural evolution and control over our biological destinies have enabled a species on this planet for the first time to gradually eliminate gender roles.

**Conclusion:** Feminism has been the social movement of the year in 2015. The year ended with a good note with women in Saudi Arabia finally getting

the right to vote. In India a public debate on patriarchal values and misogyny burst out thanks to a documentary based on the Brutal Gang-rape of Nirbhaya (Jyoti Singh) in 2012. Feminism however in the Western World seemed to get into several controversies. The college administration prosecution of radical feminist Professor Laura Kipnis over her publicly stated views on Title 9 and other features of college campuses received widespread attention. The public hounding/calling out of Professor Tim Hunt over his ironic joke and a range of stand-up comedians also admitting that they would not perform in colleges anymore because of oversensitivity made a lot of critics wonder if modern day feminism was at loggerheads with freedom of speech, conscience, academic freedom and even humor. As Such, this paper indeed concludes that modern college campus feminism not only seems to be clashing against the above stated principles but also against the core principles of Feminism itself. It will be erroneous to make a simplistic conclusion that the contemporary feminism is simply a continuation of the same tradition, albeit in newer forms in order to challenge newer issues and oppressions. What is needed hence is greater discourse on feminism, including a re-telling of its history, key movements, key figures and most importantly its core principles. The consequence of such a public discourse is anything but foreordained. Hence much is at stake and the future of feminism depends on us having the conversation.

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