



FEMINISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Feminism has been all over the place since women realized their importance in a patriarchal society. While once it found its voice in seminal texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women, John Stuart Mills' The Subjection of Women, Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, and Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, in the 21st century you may come across it on social media, fashion magazines, Hollywood, and pop music etc. Though the medium of expression may have changed, feminism is still going places and supporting women empowerment. In the 21st century, it is facing various threats: be it some people saying that feminism has failed or women themselves being apprehensive of embracing the tag of feminism. More or less, it has always helped women realizing their social roles in patriarchal societies across the globe.

Keywords: New Age Feminism, Pop Culture, Social Media, Hastag Feminism, Meninism, Patriarchy, Feminazi, Feminista.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism, as some have suggested, is the new F-word of the 21st century—feminism is losing its historical luster, and sinking into irrelevance, slowly but surely. Once a movement, started to raise women's subdued voices for use of their franchise, and later to uplift their status in a patriarchal society, it has now come to signify mere an empty sound and fury against all that is not feminist. Some may question the legitimacy of the feminist discourse in this rapidly changing globalised world; some may imply that it is a mere facade: an issue that is basking in the reflected glory of its successful past. Talk about Fourth wave feminism! You tend to wonder why such a reference is valid when there is no singular idea as to what feminism in the 21st century entails—in a time when everything from a march against a rape accused to an ad for a sanitary pad for women lures a high-heeled *feminista* to raise her threaded eyebrows.

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1P a g e

On April 13, 2005, when Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton doused a grid girl with champagne while celebrating on the podium at Beijing Grand Prix, an unexpected and rather amusing controversy arose: *Object*, a feminist group based in Shanghai, objected to this act and called for an apology from Hamilton for being sexist and anti-feminist. And, all hell broke loose on Twitter: “Lewis Hamilton. What a gold-plated”, wrote a user; then, there was an opinion at the other extreme: “Apparently Lewis Hamilton spraying a grid girl with champagne is sexist. I’m all for equality, but it all gets ridiculous sometimes.” wrote another. In 2015, during the screening of a film at Cannes, women wearing flats were turned away from walking the red carpet as it is customary for women at Cannes to wear *high heels* if they wish to walk down the glossy red carpet. On Twitter, a user wrote, “Women wearing flats were refused entry at Cannes festival, 2015. And we no longer need feminism because...?” In 2005, at Golden Globes Awards, Emma Thompson, a Hollywood actress, arrived onstage barefoot holding red-soled heels and said, “I’ve taken my heels off as a feminist statement really, because why do we wear them?” Lizzie Crocker, in *thedailybeast.com*, wrote an article, ‘How High Heels Became a Feminist Issue at Cannes.’ Back home, few feathers were ruffled when a video ‘My Choice’ featuring actress Deepika Padukone, directed by Homi Adajania, was uploaded on YouTube, and gone viral. The video features 99 women making sundry facial expressions while a voice-over by Padukone is being played in the background.

It’s reasonably a debatable issue whether we need a feminist discourse in the 21st century or not at all: “The feminists of today are the equivalent of the whining rich kid, whose parents toiled through great pains to provide them with a future they can’t respect or cherish because they have no grasp of real repression, real struggle, and real liberation”, wrote Kayleigh McEnany in an article titled ‘21st Century Feminism: An Embarrassment to My Gender’ at *theblaze.com*; Kira Cochrane, in ‘Feminism is not Finished’ at the *guardian.com*, wrote, “The young feminists who are spearheading the new activism clearly have enormous energy, ambition, and idealism, and in many cases are doing brilliant work. But the question of where the movement goes next, of what its prime focus should be, remains unanswered.” As is always the case, extremity of some cause leads to a counter-balancing of sorts; extremity of feminism has witnessed an apt but still kitschy retaliation: Meninism has made an antithetical entry into the feminist discourse. “Could 2015 be the year when downtrodden men finally grow a pair, rise up against the tyranny of modern feminism and cry, ‘I am a meninist—and I demand equality!’”. . . What is clear is that meninism is not new: it started as a starchy, intellectual movement a year ago on *feminist.com* under the clarion call of ‘Meninist—equality for all’”, wrote Martin Daubney in *The Telegraph*.

Nowadays, we stumble upon many disparaging terms that define feminism and issues pertaining to it: There has been a surge of anti-feminist sentiments, and not all are nonsense. In fact, overzealousness on part of few feminists has brought about some infamy to their cause — Online trawling of any public figure that dishes out some counter-views against any feminist cause is a usual scene.



The intent of this research paper is not to trivialize these issues; on the other hand the paper, apart from having a hawk-eye view of the feminist discourse in the 21st century, questions the relevance of such topics. The paper deals with the causes that led to such a state of affairs as far as feminism is concerned: globalization, objectification of women, pornification of society, misrepresentation of women in pop culture, overzealousness of new-age feminists, 'toxic' social media, rape culture, and many more. Apart from that, the paper also observes how new-age feminism has got over its fixation over anything feminine. New-age feminism has also addressed the issues of LGBT community; they fight for the acceptance of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals in society. And adding a twist to the tale, few feminists have raised the issues of injustice doled out to men—for them equality is for all. I am very well aware of the shortcomings of the subject of this research paper: While many research papers written on feminism in the academia focus on real issues faced by women from underprivileged backgrounds like access to services that men enjoy, prevalent sexism in society, sexual assaults on women, domestic violence, eco-feminism, and so on, this paper, mostly, deals with celebrities and public figures, and issues they come across. But we cannot deny the influence of those people on our daily lives. In this age of consumerism, our choices are determined by what we read in magazines and newspapers, by what we listen to and watch on TV. Though it may be tough to feel directly related to these issues, we know them, think about them, and have an opinion about them.

2. Social Media and Feminism: The Hashtag Feminism

Social Media, as we all know, is one the Big Bang reforms which have shaped and determined how we connect with each other and how we express ourselves in matters that affect our social and personal lives. Social media has fuelled much of the feminism of the 21st century: A new age feminist need not go out of the way to lampoon patriarchal and misogynist attitude of society, all she needs is a Twitter/Facebook account to post a scathing blog there while still lounging in the comfy ambience of a hotel room unlike an *old-age* feminist who would go out there in chilling winters and torrid summers to march against the same thing.

This is not to imply at all that our new-age feminists do not have substantial opinions and a voice: they are honest in their opinions in equal measure, but they need not think out-of-the box. In addition to that, they get the verdict right there instantly in the form of 'Likes' and 'Retweets'. Kudos to social media! "As recently as a decade ago, those seeking to fight sexism had few avenues to easily do so in a public way. Discussion of feminism and feminist values was scarce, if not dispirited; activists had been branded "feminazis" by Rush Limbaugh, and numerous celebrities like pop star Katy Perry, actress Kaley Cuoco rejected even the word "feminist". Before Twitter and Facebook exploded as platforms for news, participating in rallies was limited to those who were in those cities, or those who could



afford to take time off work and travel; letter writing was seen only by recipient of the letter.”[1]

Social media, without doubt, is an affordable and fantastic platform for feminists as they are connected 24×7 in this virtual world of the Internet. There were several occasions when online media came to the rescue of new-age feminists. Emma Watson, an American actress, kick started a feminist campaign *He For She* at United Nations on 20 September, delivering a speech on gender equality; soon after the speech, a Hashtag *He Forshe* was created on twitter, and it generated over 1 million tweets using the Hashtag in just two week period. When Boko Haram, a terrorist outfit, abducted Nigerian schoolgirls, a new Hashtag *Bring Back Our Girls* surfaced on Twitter, and it really mobilized the protest against the terrorist group. In 2014 alone, there were several feminist issues trending on Twitter: *You Ok Sis*, *Yes All Women, All Men Can*, *Survivors Privilege*, *Rape Culture Is When*, and *Why I Stayed*. Twitter and Facebook have been very handy tools for social maneuvering since their inception and feminists have lapped up these tools like never before. Offline social protests like rallies, workshops, meetings *et al* have their own merits, but when it comes to wider connect, online forums serve in a better way; before feminists realized importance of social media, it was way hard for them to speak up against issues that were taking place outside their country and get heard too. In the case of Boko Haram, criticism came from across the board and it was possible because of wider and rapid connect.

Then we move on to a question of who these feminists are and where they come from. Don't they belong to upper echelon of society? Aren't they highly educated ladies? So, is it that women who don't have a social media presence are losing out on extensive intensification of feminist movements? It may be that, but we can't deny the importance of social media as people who utilize social media keep raising the issues concerning the underprivileged.

Infighting of feminist groups and self-anointed uprightness on part of few feminists has often led to having a dreadfully dismayed picture of a cause that needs unison and connectedness for its success:

“Yet even as online feminism has proved itself a real force for change, many of the most avid digital feminists will tell you that it's become toxic. Indeed, there is a nascent genre of essays by people who feel emotionally savaged by their involvement in it—not because of sexist trolls, but because of the slashing righteousness of other feminists.”[2]

“Social media doesn't just present the good of feminism, though. While social media is an incredible medium for feminist movement to share ideas, concerns, and affect the world around them, it has also become a platform for anti-feminists who claim that modern feminism is a vessel for hate and anger at anyone who doesn't agree with

feminist philosophies. This in turn has brought about an anti-feminist movement to combat the ever growing pro-feminist movement on social media.”[3]

Feminism in the 21st century depends heavily on social media for its access to untapped territories and for the spread of the word. Social media platforms have been used in the same way street rallies were used in the past.

3. Pop Culture and Feminism

*Ok, now he was close
Tried to domesticate you
But you're an animal
Baby, it's in your nature
Just let me liberate you
You don't need no papers
That man is not your maker
And that's why I'm gon' take a Good girl
You're the hottest b*tch in this place.[4]*

These are lines from a very popular song ‘Blurred lines’: It’s reasonably easy to get the drift why these lines have been quoted here. These lines are sexist and characterize women in bad light, but, sadly, that has been the course of events these years with excessive and, at times, uncanny objectification of women, not only in popular music but in every kind of media, be it books, advertisement, cinema, and fashion scene. Nowadays many women identify themselves as b*tches thinking that this word b*tch, somehow, empowers them: Britney Spears and Madonna—both very popular western artistes—are often heard of calling themselves Britney b*tch and Madonna b*tch.

This trend has caught the attention of feminists who observe this phenomenon as an undying influence of pop culture. Female objectification has much to do with excessive consumerism where commodification of even abstract things is the norm. Popular music and cinema exercises a huge impact on our daily lives: from how we think of social issues to how we carry ourselves in society. We may cringe at the cuss words used in songs these days, but at the same time, we can’t stop loving these very songs because whatever they speak of is deeply entrenched in our psychology. “This music is a reflection of how women are viewed and treated by society at large, which is why fans are – in most cases – not shocked by the lyrical content of these songs because it is merely a translation of their day-to-day lived realities. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that their records artists have made these artists both popular and millionaires. The likes of Jay-Z, Eminem and Lil Wayne, to name just a few, are examples of rap artists whose songs have been linked to violence and misogyny, yet they continue to sell the most albums and to boast millions of loyal fans (women, girls, men and boys alike) the world over.”[5]



But to imply that feminism has been at the receiving end of pop culture would be a monumental fallacy as pop culture has come across as well-built platform for feminists to raise feminist issues. Feminism got a timely stimulus when celebrities started endorsing women-centric issues. Beyoncé's performance in front of a backdrop of words taken from author Chimamanda Ngozi's "We Should All Be Feminist" at the MTV Video Music Awards before 8.3 million TV audiences was a landmark event in feminism in the 21st century where she spoke about feminism through a medley of her songs. Emma Watson's speech *He For She* at United Nations as a women goodwill ambassador was heralded as a stepping stone towards reclaiming the word "feminist."

When it comes to the fashion industry, most fashion brands are condemned for their unrealistic portrayal of the female body (read: airbrushing), where models give us impression that they are different from us in that they use the brand they are endorsing; this leads to unrealistic aspirations and anxiety thereof, due to failure of such aspirations. Over the course of years, few brands have realized this hitch and have come up with accessories that women are comfortable with rather than proud of: "But if there is one thing designers agreed on from side of the Atlantic to the other, it's that heels are low. Flats are in vogue. And for a lot of women, that is the ultimate sign of respect." [6]

4. Feminism in the 21st Century India

In India, where patriarchy reigns supreme, women have lapped up whatever opportunities they have run into: from being highly educated to breaking the glass ceiling at workplace, new-age Indian women know what is at stake. In a country where feticide, rape, domestic violence, and body shaming are a common scene, women crave more than symbolic significance of feminism: Women have realized their importance in uplifting their status from being domestic creatures to newer roles in business, technology, research, arts, and what not. In the process, they now stand shoulder to shoulder with men. This metamorphosis has come into effect because of globalization: gone are the days when women relied on men to know whatever is happening outside of the four walls of domesticity, information technology has brought about an enormous paradigm shift in how women live and are perceived by the society. General awareness of issues has played a pivotal role in bringing women to the fore: women nowadays are equipped with social media; they know how to voice their opinion.

On December 16, 2012, in Delhi, a brutal gang rape of a 23 year old physiotherapy intern by six men on a moving bus appalled the conscience of the people of the country. As if it was the last straw, people came out on the streets of the capital and protested against the leniency of the government. Anger spilled out on the streets, literally. India witnessed a huge transformation in the way people generally react to such incidents of violence against women. Social media came in handy; those who can't attend the protest marches vented their anger on

Facebook, Twitter, and various media platforms. “The women’s movement in India and feminist activists continues the fight against societal norms that promote violence against women and continue to struggle against the apathy of the state and its unreasonable diktats on women’s security. The questions, however, are not just for India or Indian feminism alone. This incident throws light on violence in an everyday context that is getting increasingly overlooked in feminist International Relations’ scholarship.”[7]

Bollywood is a major force which shapes the imagination of millions of people living in India; Bollywood, for the most part of its history, has had an acute obsession about scheming women in the fringe of the spectrum of characterization. May be, it was just reflecting the mindset of the Indian society. Women have always been objectified in hero-centric Bollywood films; more or less, they have been serving as eye-candies; they are mere an agency of sensational gimmicks in the grand scheme of a Bollywood film, most of the times. “However, more recently, the tide seems to be turning in favor of these (women-centric) films with women-oriented scripts gaining acceptance in the industry. On their part, actresses too are more open to playing protagonist for a change.”[8]

Now, there is a realization on the part of producers and directors that people want to watch content-driven women-centric films. With the arrival of multiplexes, it is relatively easier to give a slot to off-beat movies, while in the past, it was always a risk to release such films on single-screen theatres in terms of profit. Gauri shinde, who made *English Vinglish*, elaborates on this issue, “Most of the audience are men; they buy tickets at the counter. Besides, there is this perception that women-centric films will be boring and righteous. Unless more women get out on their own and decide what they want to watch, things will not change.”

In the past decade, there have been several influential content-driven releases with women playing major roles: *Black, Dor, Fashion, No One Killed Jessica, Kahaani, The Dirty Picture, English Vinglish, Mary Kom, Mardaani*, and *NH 10*.

Feminism became an issue of debate when a video directed by Homi Adajania, featuring Deepika Padukone, *My Choice*, was released by Vogue India on YouTube. While many dubbed the video as a realization of women empowerment, on the other hand there was a severe backlash against the video on social media. Those against the video challenged the validity of choice feminism. Choice feminism implies that a woman can make her own choices independent of societal norms, and that the choices she makes is a feminist statement on her part.

Let it be my choice to marry, or not to marry

To have sex before marriage, to have sex out of marriage, or to not have sex

My choice to love temporarily, or to lust forever

My choice to love a man, or a woman.[9]

Many objected to the idea of sex outside the marriage as it smacks of radical feminism which is rejected by one and all. But to make furor over this idea only would amount to neglecting the larger message the video carries: that is about being aware of your entitlement to individual choices. “The video has been subject to harsh criticism, most of which are aimed at Deepika’s notorious statement – ‘My choice... to have sex outside of marriage’. While there are many articles that heatedly debate her stance on extramarital affairs, the larger issue at play in Deepika’s video is the problematic discourse of choice feminism that she engages in.”[10]

And then, there was this question that how a magazine like Vogue India can raise such issues, when they themselves dictate how and what a woman should wear to look more appealing to men.

While sex ratio in most parts of the country remains skewed, there has been a greater receptiveness on the part of the parents to get their daughters educated in the past decade, as is evident by the Board results where girls generally outclass boys.

So, we can say that India, too, is witnessing a new wave of feminism in the 21st century.

5. Feminism vs. Meninism

New-age feminists are too sensitive; any non-feminist act or anti-feminist act, for that matter, can needle them to take up cudgels against men and shout out loud “We Are Feminists!!!” Such hoopla around feminism has left men astounded and wondering whether they are losing out on something. Men, most of the times, are attacked for the poor plight of women as they are the ones who founded patriarchal notions. Are men too at the receiving end of patriarchy is a question that has prickled the conscience of men these days! Most of the times, men are booed when they cry, because patriarchy says “Be A Man!” and real men don’t cry in public. While we sympathize with women who break down and start crying, we always have a very taunting advice for men who do the same. Why? Because they have to be men!

Meninism is retaliatory term against feminism; it all started when a twitter account *Meninist* started sharing tweets about men: how men face double standards, how they are mocked by women for not having six-pack abs, and, amusingly, how they are entitled to everything that women are. It may seem offensively outlandish and an insult to feminism, however, things are not as simple as someone may be thinking. “Instead of the balance being maintained throughout history, the ‘masculine’ trait of physical strength, through subjugation, established dominance over the ‘feminine’. Over thousands of years this led to an all-pervading culture-creation stretching across the entire gamut of human lives—from personal relationship and domestic life to language, clothing, body, sexuality, profession, work, religion, recreation,

entertainment, politics, and so on. This process came to be identified as the creation of patriarchy.”[11] This has given way to several misconceptions about patriarchy vis-à-vis masculinity: that men don’t cry, that they have to work harder than women as they are MEN, they are ‘breadwinners’, they are control-freak, and so on.

“The American men’s right author Warren Farrel calls it “the glass cellar”. There might be a glass ceiling for women, Farrel once told the Observer, but of the 25 professions ranked lowest (in the US), 24 of them are 85-100% male. That’s things like roofer, welder, garbage collector, sewer maintenance— jobs with very little security, little pay and few people want them ‘It’s a neglected form of sexism,’ Benatar says in a telephone interview. ‘It’s true that in the developed world the majority of economic and political roles are occupied by males. But if you look at the bottom—for example, the prison population, the homeless population, or the number of people dropping out of school—that is overwhelmingly male. You tend to find more men at the very top but also at the very bottom.’”[12]

But it’s very hard to articulate such opinions when women are still fighting for equal pay, and against sexism, sexual assault, and domestic violence. “It’s no shock that at a time women’s right are under attack (austerity hitting women hardest, abortion under threat), the politics of envy rears its head. For it is victim-envy, this me-too masculism. Or let’s just call it out: it is conservatism that says any challenge to the system, any rights won, have gone “too far”. These people cannot speak about the inequalities riven between classes, ethnicities and genders because it’s all about individuals who power through”.[13]

Most people dub meninism as a social media fad, and those who are embracing this movement as attention-seekers or anti-feminist. Liberation of men from snares of patriarchy sounds ludicrous and outrageous as men have been perpetrators of women for ages.

Yes, women have also pledged their support to meninism as they think in this heady rush of feminism, men have been somewhat ignored. “Hey guess what? Women have been raped, catcalled, dehumanized (example- calling us dolls, cats, b*tch), and what happened to men? You get made fun of for not having muscle?” , wrote a Tumblr user in a post.

‘Meninist’ was coined by *feminist.com*, and it was started as a movement where men too stand up against atrocities against women. Now under a twitter Hashtag, it has been used to ridicule women for their obsession with feminism. “Tiresomely, these early meninists once again bemoaned ‘the patriarchy’— i.e. men — for being responsible for just about every human problem, be it war, colonialism, racism, homophobia and capitalism. . . . So far so light-hearted. But more recently, the movement has heated up by piggybacking serious hashtags such as *WomenAgainstFeminism* and *YesAllMen*.”[14]

6. Conclusion

It's always been a messy affair to come to a conclusion on a subject that is too new to decide on its fate: Feminism in the 21st century is hardly close to feminism that we witnessed in the 19th century and 20th century. We talk about it, we read about it, we write about it, but the palpability of feminism observed in previous centuries is hard to come by. There are innumerable research papers written on feminism (third wave feminism, eco-feminism specially) in the academia, but we hardly talk about fourth wave feminism, and interestingly fifth wave feminism, if any. We have seen how feminism is losing its relevance as far as its trajectory is concerned outside the academia. But feminism exists in various forms as we have read in the paper; it's an issue worth a debate as women are still suffering at the hands of patriarchy, notwithstanding a lot has changed in comparison to previous centuries. Women need to take a stand against what is not acceptable, and get called a feminist should be an honor, rather than a stigma. And now feminism means an inclusion: equality for all—women, men, gays, lesbians, transsexuals, intersexuals and queers.

We have a very short-sighted view of feminism in the 21st century as we have just entered into it; we shall be able to have a better understanding of it in upcoming 25 years hereupon. For the time being, let's just say we are feminists, shall we?

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