Chapter I

THE WOMAN QUESTION

The meaning of the term 'feminism' raises controversy and is changing with time. Modern feminism, in spite of many similarities, is by no means the same thing as the Woman Question which inspired women in the Western World in the late nineteenth century. For this reason, it is difficult to provide a definition of feminism. At its simplest level, it represents a criticism of the position of women in relationship to men and a desire to improve that position. Feminists in the West, it is true, have often seen the movement principally in terms of greater equality between the sexes - equal opportunities in education and employment, equal right over children and property and an attempt at ending the double standard of sexual morality. These demands formed the core of the nineteenth century women's movement and early twentieth century feminist movement in Europe and America. But there have been other fundamental issues and goals as well behind the movement such as economic and legal independence for themselves as women and a greater recognition of their rights to individuality and self-expression.

In attempting to define feminism, therefore, we must keep in mind different intellectual traditions which influenced its development. Of these traditions, the most fundamental is
perhaps the equal-rights tradition expressed most clearly in the writings of the British thinkers, John Stuart Mill in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which stresses the need for removal of restrictions on women's liberty, importance of education and profession, and the right to support themselves. Most important of all, perhaps, has been the desire for an end to women's subordination both in government and in the family. Feminist thinkers of England and France in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century directed their efforts towards the formulation of these rights for women as well as for a new morality, a new code of behaviour and sexual ethics for women.

Gradually there was a new frankness in their way of the thinking of women. They started questioning the male domination and entrenched attitude towards them. They refused to conform to the traditional role of women and challenged the ideals of marriage and motherhood. These women came to be known towards the end of the nineteenth century as the New Women. However the New Woman's radical stance was taken generally on matters of personal choice only - it was not based on any recognisable organisation. And the questions that the New Women raised for their status before the society at the end of the nineteenth century and also in the early twentieth century was referred to as the Woman Question. And this formed an essential part of the
thought of that period. It was not until the militant suffragette movement of the early twentieth century that the enfranchisement began to be regarded as the cure for all female oppression.2

During the years following World War II, or to be more precise, in 1945, the Western World witnessed the appearance of a new movement, the 'Women's Liberation Movement' which shocked the complacent attitude of the world on women into one of disbelief. According to the leaders of this movement, the position of women in the society has been such that they are as if to be seen only, and not heard; and this had been generally so for ages.

For years, there was practically no sign of any urge for a movement in the millions of words written about women and for women. Women were always told and they accepted that their role in life was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. Tradition told them that they could desire no greater destiny than to bask in their glory as a wife and mother. Articles were written for women on how to keep a home clean, bring up children and how to keep the husbands happy and content. They were taught to be feminine; and feminine women do not want higher education, career and independence. Those who did were frowned upon by not only males but by their own sex as well. All they had to do was to devote their lives from early girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children for
him. This image of woman as housewife and mother has been largely created by writers and editors who were men. There was no other way for a woman to dream of any other kind of creation or of the future. There was no way she could even dream about herself, except as her children's mother, or her husband's wife. And if she felt within her a vague, undefined wish for something more in life than washing dishes, punishing and praising children, the women's magazines, designed by men, solved it either by advising her to dye her hair blonde or black or simply having another baby to keep herself busy. 3

The women did not even have to choose their husbands; they merely waited to be chosen, waiting passively until the husbands, children and a new home decided what the rest of their lives would be. Women were advised on how to keep their husbands happy at home; and it was generally considered their fault if the men turned elsewhere for their pleasure. Marriage was the centre of social life and social aspiration, and it was the wife's duty to make marriage a success. If it wasn't it was her duty to make the best of things. They had to ensure that their husbands loved them, for marriage was the only refuge for women. Upholders of middle class Christian morality did not encourage women working; they believed that if a woman neglects her husband and children to pursue a career, it would surely result in disintegration of the family. For, in the patriarchal system, the husband
was the provider—he provided for the food, the shelter, education for the children and even settled them in life. He was the authoritarian figure; and that is why he could all too easily exploit this system without challenge.

Because of women's lack of economic rights, they were completely dependent on their husbands. They were tutored to lean on their fathers, husbands or sons. So, the vulnerability of women was not just from feminine weakness, but also from their lack of economic independence. They were taught to believe that true moral happiness lay in the performance of domestic duties. Sex was considered more of a marital duty for procreation. It was considered a sin to indulge in it for pleasure. Thus, the women were isolated in their homes, living a restricted life. Confined to the house, and passive, a woman existed only by pleasing men. She was completely dependent on his protection in a world that was made by men for men. There was no scope for her to question herself, "Who am I? What do I want in life?"

Thinkers like Rousseau laid great emphasis on equality, but only on equality where power and wealth of man was concerned. But as for man-woman relationship, he did not believe that women needed equality and independence. They must depend on men; and their value weighed only in relation to men. So, women's education must only consist of learning how to please men. He believed that woman should be educated
enough to make intelligent conversation with their husbands to entertain them, but not have a mind and opinion of their own.  

It was Mary Wollstonecraft, who, with her publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, stressed the importance of women as human beings, and not sexual objects. She pointed out that women too, as human beings, must fulfil their primary needs, like men. And their human abilities can be determined only if they are given the freedom, opportunity and education to develop themselves. Wollstonecraft believed that it is society and the environment that have moulded a woman into the submissive being she has been. As Ellen Moers in her *Literary Women* (1977) quotes Wollstonecraft -

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience, but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep woman in the dark, because the former only wants slaves, and the latter a plaything.

So, Wollstonecraft stressed on the importance of education and determination of character in a woman.
Margaret Fuller, in her publication, *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) also laid importance on freedom as the fundamental need of women and the importance of her nature to grow and intellect to develop. Self-independence should be achieved through self-help and self-respect, she pointed out. Fuller insisted that it is important for women to shake herself out of her traditional dependence on men to become self-reliant; then only will she be able to realize her worth as a free being. For, as John Charvet points out, Fuller said that women have lived too much for others and not enough for themselves, for the value inherent in them.

In 1857, when the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed in England women could divorce their husbands on grounds of cruelty, desertion or rape, and in 1882, the Married Women's Property Act was passed which gave women a legal right to their own property after marriage. Although this gave some rights to the woman where her married life was concerned, it was still not easy for the woman, because divorced women were socially unacceptable. When in 1882, women were given the right to own money and property in their own names, it became less easy for the men to treat them indifferently for it gave the women a certain amount of independence, an economic status in society. Although more often than not, they continued to be dependent on their men.
A product of the individualist school of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill, in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869) says, as put by Charvet, "All selfish inclinations are rooted in the present structure of relations between men and women. The boy and adult man are corrupted by their sense of superiority."\(^8\)

But when Freud put forward his new discovery of the unconscious working of the feminine mind, no educated American woman dared to question the Freudian truth. Whether they believed or accepted it is another matter. According to him, as Betty Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) put it,

"Women were a strange, inferior, less than subhuman species. He saw them as childlike dolls, who existed in terms only of man's love, to love man and serve his needs."\(^9\)

Even if women were considered inferior by birth and nature as Freud and his followers believed, science does not justify such a view today. This inferiority, evidently is caused by women's lack of education and opportunity which stunted their growth - mental and emotional. Their culture did not permit this growth to fulfil their potentials as human beings.
Simone de Beauvoir, however, blames women for their attitude. She says, as put by John Charvet,

Women have gained only what men have been willing to grant. They have taken nothing ... but have been content to receive, and hence have remained passive recipients defined by men.10

If we look back at the history of the feminist movement, we will see that the most fundamental principle which stands out in the years is the equal-rights tradition which is the origin of this movement. This tradition, based essentially on the philosophy of human rights, is expressed most strongly by John Stuart Mill who emphasized the equality of opportunity and removal of restrictions on women's liberty. Besides supporting the equality of civic and political rights, he also stressed the importance of the right to vote for women.

And over the years, writings of John Stuart Mill, Fuller, Beauvoir and so on, have played an all-important part in the Women's Liberation Movement in the early twentieth century. Women were ultimately given equal opportunities to enter and pursue education. Several colleges and institutions were set up where women could prosecute their education with a view to attaining a career, and thus an entirely new field of work was provided for them. This naturally opened up a wide
range of opportunities for women in every field.

Then many began to question further a woman's place in contemporary society, in her family and her home. They proved themselves to be radical and felt that they had a right to choose a career or matrimony, and pointed out that present marriage in all its aspects, was little less than slavery. They made independent choice about having children, with or without the authority of a marriage licence. As Germaine Greer says in her *The Female Eunuch* (1970) -

Childbearing was never intended by biology as a compensation for neglecting all other forms of fulfilment and achievement. It was never intended to be as time consuming and self-conscious a process as it is. One of the deepest evils in our society is tyrannical nurturance.

These radical feminists challenged not only the structure of the family but the structure of society also. Gone were the illusion of masculine wisdom. They wanted yet more freedom from the stifling social conventions - they expressed the need for personal freedom; they wanted more space for emotional and mental growth.

The Women's Movement therefore, with all its changing priorities has changed to a large extent the
accepted values of the western world. However, it must be
mentioned here, that for a majority of women in the world,
the International Year of Women, 1986, passed without their
consciousness of it. Nevertheless there has been certain
changes - new laws have been introduced, new vocations, new
fields and policies are drawn out protecting women's rights
in certain areas. Today a country can no longer assume a
passive attitude on women's issue.

The fairly recent publication of *The Female Eunuch*
(1970) by Germaine Greer had also made a considerable impact
on the world in general. Greer attacks the idea of the
Eternal Feminine, the stereotype woman which is held as the
ideal in our culture and to which women are expected to
aspire. She admits that women, as traditionally conceived,
is a passive sexual being, but she has been castrated by man.
Given the opportunity a woman's nature and personality as
well as sexual inclinations can be as active and adventurous
as those of any man. She thinks it absurd to pledge herself
for life to another - for she too, like man, must have
freedom.

However, according to Engels\textsuperscript{12} in *The Origin of the
Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), that woman was
the slave of man in the beginning of society is a wrong idea;
for women occupied not only a free but highly respected
position among all savages and barbarians in those days. He
said that in the beginning, humanity lived in a state of sexual freedom and this promiscuity led to a confusion regarding the paternity of the children born to women; so the lineage could be traced only through the female line, that is, according to mother-right. Therefore, the women were treated with respect and consideration. They enjoyed a certain power. But with economic development, a gradual change was brought about. Domestication of animals and breeding of cattle, cultivation of land brought in unexpected sources of wealth; and all this new wealth now belonged to the man. This gave him an important status in the family. To keep this wealth within his own family, to pass it on to his own sons, the traditional order of inheritance - mother-right - had to be overthrown. Man took over the control of his own house; they made the decisions, and women obeyed. Thus women were degraded, dominated and became slaves. She became an instrument to bear his children and was fenced in with chastity; whereas man still enjoyed the pleasures of sexual freedom. Thus started the monogamous family where the woman belonged to a single man as his possession; and man, to beget children of undisputed paternity, evolved rigid marriage ties which could no longer be dissolved easily by the woman. It was a marriage of convenience. But the rights and pleasures of conjugal infidelity belonged to the man alone. Even today, the practice of extramarital sexual freedom with unmarried women still exists side by side with monogamy. It
is the continuation of the old sexual freedom in man's favour.

Thus we have seen how the woman's role at home and in the society and her position at home and in the society accordingly, have also changed through the ages. And the woman is finally emerging as an individual, with her recognition of all the rights that her male counterpart enjoys.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. (1) Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)

(ii) Condorcet, *Admission of Women to Full Citizenship* (1790)


5. Ibid., pp. 15-16


7. John Charvet, op.cit., p. 29

8. Ibid., p. 40

9. Betty Friedan, op.cit., p. 100

10. John Charvet, op.cit., p. 100
