

Introduction

“To awaken the people it is the women who must be awakened once she is on the move, the family moves, the villages and nation moves.” Jawaharlal Nehru

The aim of my thesis is to explain and examine the status of women in society going through the theory of feminism. In this thesis I have tried to highlight the unequal status of women and to show how women are forced to face inequality in every sphere in their life. We know that women form nearly half the population of the world and it is fair that any modern country should provide a balanced opportunity structure for men and women so that both can contribute equally to development efforts. According to Vivekananda women are just one wing of a bird and if one wing of the bird is absent, the bird cannot fly. Similarly, no nation can be flourished by forfeiting women. Women are the backbone of a nation. Unless women make progress, the society cannot develop truly. In spite of this basic truth, women are not given adequate opportunities to develop and play an important role in the process of development in most societies, even today. Although women accomplish two thirds of the world's working hours, they are treated as second class citizens in most societies. In India since independence, equal rights and equal status has been granted but very few women, who are educated, have been able to achieve equality in various fields and still at large numbers of them are discriminated, exploited and subjugated. Feminism is a movement to assert the interest of women as a sex and to

protest their discriminations, exploitations. Feminism is a humanistic concern and it is about liberation from our traditional social structure, liberation from patriarchy and also liberation from gender discrimination. In the field of education we see gender discrimination at all levels. Feminists say that the rigid sex based division of labour is the most obvious form of expressing women's inequality.¹

The problem of patriarchy, gender inequality, socio-cultural oppression and ritual form of torture on women has plagued both the East and West since the dawn of civilization. One of the major developments in the second half of the twentieth century has been the emergence of a growing consciousness, a systematic move by feminists and women's upliftment organizations in France, America, England, India and other parts of the world to liberate women from the bondage of religion and traditional ethics and also from the socio-cultural bondage of inferiority, inequality, patriarchal ego and phallogocentric politics.² Different feminists thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft ('A Vindication of the Rights of Women', 1792), Simone de Beauvoir ('The Second Sex', 1949), Judith Butler's ('Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', 1990), John Stuart Mill's ('The Subjection of Women, 1869'), have raised the basic question which is mainly to save women from the patriarchal domination, gender crisis etc.³

¹ Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Ohio State University Press, 1995, p.251

² Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski, "Margaret Fuller: Feminist Writer and Revolutionary (1810-1850)". In Dale Spender, *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers*, Pantheon books, 1983, pp.75-89.

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge, 1993, P.95.

As Mary Wollstonecraft, in her writing 'A vindication of the rights of women' asserted that women should have an education commensurate with their position in society and redefine that position by arguing with the claim that women are most important and essential to the nation because a woman can educate a society by providing education to its children and as well as she can be best 'companion' to her husband. She also claimed the view that woman is first of all a human being rather than a sexual being and rejecting the discrimination between men and women, she further argues that women have every right to lead a rational human life, and they must come out from their suffocating boundary of different household works to the larger periphery of the society to get the social, political, cultural freedom.⁴In the **First Chapter** of this thesis which is entitled as **Feminism and Women's Movements**, I propose to discuss about this kind of women suppression and about women's movements, their critical conditions in society. Feminism itself is a movement to restore to women their humanity. The concept of feminism developed in Europe in the 18th century when social and intellectual upheavals were taking place there. At that time people were against of the existing order in political areas and women were also involved in this movement to get liberty and equality. All feminists are concerned about women's oppression and want to find out its causes. There are different kinds of feminists, they also differ in their analyses of the causes

⁴ See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the rights of Woman: with Structures on political and moral Rights*, Printed at Boston by Peter Edes for Thomas and Andrews, 1792.

of the subordinate position of women but they all are same in the matter of demanding equality and liberty of women.

The British philosopher John Lock, in his book *Second Treatise of Government*, 1689, talked about the equal status of men and women without any discrimination. J.S Mill, in his book, *The Subjection of Women*, criticized the dominance of stronger sex and asserted the view that gender is socially constructed and the general view of women's subordinated position in society is not acceptable. An illegal subordination of one sex to the other is one of the major offences to woman kind. He maintains that the principle which executes the power relation between men and women is wrong. Mill advocates the concept of meritocracy rather than aristocracy with the view that both male and female as human being should have equal opportunity to achieve their goals. He firmly rejected women's inferior, weak and irrational status.⁵

Now it should be pointed out that feminists were concerned with 'philosophy' and discussed epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, methodology, philosophy of science from a feminist point of view as most of the great figures in the history of philosophy, when they talked about women, were plainly sexist, in conformity with the patriarchal ideology of their times. Lange in Aristotle's two essays named "Woman is not a rational animal: on Aristotle's biology of reproduction" and "Aristotle and the politicization of the soul"- describes the close

⁵ J.S Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, London, 1869, p. 133.

connection between Aristotle's biology and his political philosophy. She (Lange) declares how Aristotle's opinion that woman, being a "privation of man", should be dominated by man rests on Aristotle's theories of generation and sex distinction. In the **Second Chapter**, which is entitled as **Feminism in philosophy and Ethics**, I propose to discuss how feminism has thrown a new light to the problems of philosophy by challenging the traditional philosophy as an aggressive argumentative style as it is based on patriarchal nature. Feminist philosophers also criticized the traditional ethics as it mainly focused on men's perspective.⁶ Feminist ethics is mainly to transform the traditional ethical beliefs which devalued women. But if we go to the *Vedic* society, it would see that this society was conducive to the freedom of women because it recognized women's potentiality.⁷ There were women like Gārgī, Maitreyī, Lopāmudrā and Arundhatī who could challenge any audacious male intellect. Vedic girls enjoyed liberty for free love and for attending socio-cultural functions. Though the *Ṛig Vedic* age gave freedom to women, the subsequent periods in socio-cultural history of India showed a picture of victimization and ritual form of torture which is proved from the epics, *Puraṇas*, *Smṛitis*, *Sutras* and *Dharma Śāstras*. For example, Sita was tested in fire on the altar of chastity, Draupatī, being the wife of five husbands, was turned into a commodity and was humiliated before the elders by her husbands on the one side, and by the Kauravas on another side. Yudhisthira, the son of Dharma himself underestimates

⁶ See Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: perspectives on Difference and Equality*, Indiana University Press, 1991.

⁷ B.S. Upadhyaya, *Women in Ṛgveda*, rev. ed., Benaras: 1941, p.3

women by saying that the Vedas, the Ṛishis and moral laws have held women to be false. Moreover, the pathetic lament of Gandhari in the 'Strivilāpa Parva' of *The Mahābhārata* bears true testimony to the fact that the epic women were really helpless and sub-servant to the dominant male ego. In *Manusmṛiti* women's freedom was curtailed and Manu maintains that a female must be subjected to her father in her childhood, to her husband in youth and to her son in old age. Manu emphasized the birth of a male child (*Putrārthe Kriyate bhārya*) and deprecated the female one, and this fact is proved to be fatal even in present society.⁸ The Rajputs blindly followed Manu and used to curse the inauspicious day when a female child was born. The introduction of 'Sati' system forced a wife to burn herself on the pyre of her dead husband. Dowry system and widowhood are the two other rituals of torture from which it is very difficult to protect women in our society. In the **Third Chapter** which is entitled as **Women status in the Past traditional Indian culture**, I propose to discuss on the issue of women's status with regard to the ancient traditional Indian culture. In this section, it has been proposed to describe that the women are part of our life and they have an important role in one's development of personality. Men and women are equal in status and woman is man's companion. In society there should be a kind of mutual co-operation between them. Through the India's ancient culture we came to know that Indian tradition respected womanhood and an honoured place had been ascribed to women. But

⁸*Manu-Smṛiti*, 9/2.

during the medieval period women's position went down considerably and their position became very miserable because at that time there were so many customs for which they were deprived of their rights of equality with men. But in the modern India women's position has changed. Now they are getting equal opportunities to that of men especially they have the right to receive education and they can also participate in the public and the political life of the nation. But still in society there are some sorts of evils, which cannot be removed from the society fully even these days.⁹

However, human civilization is an evolutionary process and has taken thousands of years to reach present modern stage. Men and women have equally contributed its growth yet with the passage of time there has been discrimination between the two sexes. The global empowerment process informs us of the neglected condition of women in social, economic and political field. In the societal aspect all family affairs are managed and coordinated by the decisions of the male members and a woman has nothing to say. In the domestic dictionary, a woman is regarded second in command and the patriarchal superiority standard has always suppressed women.¹⁰ Moreover a woman is reared up from her early childhood to be soft, loving, submissive, tolerant, less questioning and going beyond all these makes her an object of social suspect. As a result, the economic empowerment of women seems to

⁹Chandrakala Padia (Ed.), *Feminism, Tradition and Modernity*, IAS, Simla, 2002, PP.205-206.

¹⁰Judith Butler, "Preface", *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 2006, PP.XX.

be a distant dream because in the process of profit-making activity women participation is not easily welcomed.¹¹ Actually women are expected to provide manual service to the productive enterprise and also they are expected to discharge all their household duties without any complaints. Even after these, they are not respected as their household works do not bring money at home. Another discriminated picture is seen all over the world when one peeps into the political status of women. Most of the women are not politically educated, nor trained nor empowered because their political rights are often neglected. They are not expected to be very active and able participants in the political process of a country of its decision making all over the world. The traditional category of political thought is mainly based on male knowledge and man's experiences. Men are projected as "productive", "political", "public" and "rational" whereas women as "non-productive", "non-political", "private" and "emotional". Political philosopher Bentham held the view that women are confined with child care and they do not care for the welfare of their nation. J.S. Mill said that the great occupation of women should be to beautify life; they are to water others' plants. Simon de Beauvoir, on the other hand, claims that it is the whole process by which "feminity is manufactured in society". A woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. In the **Fourth Chapter**, which is entitled as **Socio- Political apprehension of women's status**, I propose to show

¹¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, Jonathan Glover, *Women, culture, and Development: A study of Human Capabilities*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995, PP.1-15.

the socio-political apprehension of women's status, their participation in politics. Political participation is necessary not only as a means to understand the nature of the political system or to control the functioning of system, but also as a means to build up the character of the people because political participation has some role to play in nation building but women participation in politics do not present a very rosy picture because they are heavily dominated by men in political systems.¹² Although today's women have learnt to come out from the four wall and gave their contributions to the operation of society at every level but they still remain subjects of inequality and oppression. The equality of men and women in the matter of rights has been granted by the Constitutions but discrimination against women was deeply rooted in the structure of society. So, independence was an essential precondition of the emancipation of women and a new life was brought to the movement for the emancipation of women. Vast masses of women participated in the freedom struggle after 1905.¹³ At that time women started to break their restricted lives and entered administrative, professional and political fields as equals of men. Women were elected to Parliament and State legislatures. They became cabinet ministers, Ambassadors and judges. Different institutions of education, law, technology were open to them and they got chance to enter new occupations in the modern sector. But it was observed that the right to political equality could not help or enabled women to play their role as partners and constituents in the political process.

¹²Zainab Rahman, "Women and Politics", In *Women and Society*, Kalpaz Publication, Delhi, 2005, PP.142-157.

¹³ Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from The Women's Liberation Movement*, Basic Books. 2001, P.91.

Although the number of women's participation in politics increased, but their ability to produce an impact on the political process was negligible. So the erosion of productive roles makes women's position as only entities and also makes their lives cheap. Though, all the laws made various schemes to emancipate women they continued to be second-class citizens and according to the Marxists the lower degree of participant by women in politics was due to the nature of modern capital economy. Women have been socially taught to subordinate themselves, but it is the fact that they constitute half of the society, women belong to all sections and for that it is not possible to secure freedom without bringing women into the political areas. Education is an essential thing to emancipate women because an educated woman is developed and enabled to give proper response to the political issues.

Gender discrimination is another form of domination of women in our society. From ancient times in Indian society women were neglected.¹⁴ Though the world developed in the way of modern information technology the Indian society is far away to divide the power equally among women till today. In social, political, educational field, women are suppressed unanimously. The history of women is no linear, nor does it have a well-organized structure. Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers as well defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifeness and motherhood are accepted as pivotal role for women. In the **Fifth Chapter** which is entitled as **Gender discrimination and the crisis of**

¹⁴Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge, 1997, P.95

morality, I propose to show the picture of this kind of discrimination and gender in equalities. It has been described there that due to gender discrimination women have to face problems in every walks of their life. Women constitute about fifty percent of world's total population but vast masses of women are victims of sexual abuse, deprivation and social injustice even they are deprived of proper education, healthcare and others. Women are not treated equally with men; they are subjected to oppression, deprivation and discrimination. Especially the poorest women suffer from these kinds of injustice in the society, in the family and in the community.¹⁵ There is also violence against women in our society and in our country. Every six hours somewhere in India a young married women is either burnt alive or coerced to commit suicide. The effects of this violence can be devastating to a woman's reproductive health as well as to other aspects of her life. In the eyes of Constitution there is no discrimination between men and women, but discrimination against them has gone a long way. After 65 years of independence women still remain the secondary citizen of the country. Today's women are the companions of their male partners in every field and every sphere of life, yet our conservative social systems do not allow them independency. Gender inequality is revealed by imbalance in sex ratio, female foeticide, and lower participation of women in the decision making process etc. In order to satisfy the biological needs men oppress women. In the village community women are not involved in decision-making process and in the

¹⁵ Susan Hekman, "Material Bodies". In Donn Welton (ed.) *Body and Flesh: a Philosophical Reader*, Blackwell publishing, 1998, PP.61-70.

Muslim community women are not allowed to participate in manual work outside the home. In this way gender discrimination affects women's economic autonomy. So some reforms are needed to improve the status of women in our society. Women should be educated, they should get the fair chance in everything so that they can prove themselves as equal to that of their male partners and especially gender justice should be developed as a way of life. Now, if we minutely follow the nature of women, we would be able to see that there is a close relation between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature.¹⁶The concept of 'ecology' has a link with the concept of 'feminine'. In the **Sixth Chapter** which is entitled as **Feminism and Eco-feminism**, I propose to discuss about the relation between nature and women as well as explain the objective of eco-feminism. Eco-feminism is the concept about ecology as well about the concept of feminine and according to the eco-feminists, there is a close link between women and nature. Eco-feminism or ecological feminism is a philosophical movement came from the feminist and ecological thinking. This ecological thinking leads to the idea that the domination or oppression of women is directly connected to the abuse of the environment. Ecological feminism is a name given to a variety of positions that have roots in different feminist practices and philosophies. Naturally, these different perspectives reflect different understandings of the nature and solution to pressing environmental problems. In the **Seventh Chapter** of this thesis I propose to discuss

¹⁶ Plant Judith, (ed) *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989, P.1.



about Women's **Empowerment**. Women's empowerment means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from the domination and claim equality.¹⁷ Women's role was confined to the domestic arena and it has now shifted into the role of productive job sectors. Millions of rural women today live work and struggle to survive. Although, women make the half of the society, their social, economic and political status is lower than that of men in most of the societies. This is mainly due to the gender disparities and the patriarchal attitudes of the people. Stereotypical attitudes and practice are the reasons of the deprivation of women in all areas of society-in culture, in institutions, work places, even in the families. Some important things are needed to empower women. There should be an environment through positive economic and social policies for development of women; they should enjoy all the rights on equal basis with men, there should be equal access to health, to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life. There also should be equal access to education, employment and security.¹⁸

Women's empowerment is the most needed ways through which women can be liberated from male domination. Women's empowerment means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they break away from the patriarchal domination and claim equality. Traditionally, women's role was confined

¹⁷Thomas Potterfield, *the Business of Employee Empowerment democracy and ideology in the Work place*, Quorum Books, 1999, P.6.

¹⁸See National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001).

to the four walls of their house and now it has switched over to productive job sector.

In the **concluding chapter**, I propose to describe how women can be liberated or can have the equal access to opportunities. Today's women became aware of their rights and their potential and they are also proving themselves in various fields. So it can be said that women alone can change their positions. No one will give them power rather they will have to take it. Women will have to use all methods and means available to achieve the equality that has been granted to them. In this Chapter; I also propose to suggest that women's position in our society can be developed with the light of Swami Vivekananda and other contemporary thinkers' walks of life. As Swamiji says, "There is no change for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing, denying women their rightful place".