



TRACING FEMINISM: FROM DEMANDING VOTING RIGHTS TO EMBRACING BARBIE

Vaishnavi Kunal*

What was it like to be a woman in the 1700s or 1800s or 20th century and what is it like today in the 21st century? The experience for women in different timelines differed widely, as feminism as a concept evolved through time and so did its relationship with femininity. In this article, we will delve into what and how was feminism when it originated, how it grew over the passage of time with various waves, its relationship with femininity, and finally how it is perceived and embraced by today's generation especially, by Gen Z.

Most historians ascribe the emergence of Feminism to the Enlightenment era as it was the time when the discussion over women's role in society began to take place. Prior to it, women's role was confined to the domestic sphere. They were required to cook, clean and produce children. They were looked upon as sub ordinates of men and to live their lives according to the will of the men in the house, first as their fathers' will and later as their husbands' will. It was during the Enlightenment era, when women stepped out of the house and discussed their rights and roles as they learned and socialized, in cafes, salons, parlours, etc. Since access to such avenues was restricted to the ones with money, it didn't have the participation of the entire female population.

This era witnessed women philosophers who advocated for women's equal status as men. Catharine Macaulay, the first English woman historian, criticised patriarchy and paternal rights while arguing that if rights exist at all, they are to be universal in nature, meaning equal rights for women. Mary Wollstonecraft, a British feminist philosopher, in her book, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" published in 1772, writes "If marriage is the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever..." She argues that it is the education

*BA LLB, FIRST YEAR, CHANAKYA NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY.

system of her time that made women incapable and inferior to men resulting in their dependency on men. It is this era, that built the foundation for upcoming waves of feminism.

The very first wave of Feminism was marked by the first formal Women's rights convention, the Seneca Falls convention of 1848. It is to be noted here, that the waves of feminism are not an indication of linear progression, but rather a tool or more like an analogy to understand and distinguish different perspectives of feminism among different generations of women. The first wave of feminism was concerned with women's right to vote and to own property. It included the women's suffrage movement, and the wave lasted till the early 1900s. Women by this time, were comfortable in participating in political discussions. Women in huge numbers took to the streets, demonstrated and marched for voting rights along with making petitions in court.

Sojourner Truth, an African American women's rights activist, in her great speech titled "Ain't I a Woman?" delivered in 1851 before the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, says, "I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights... I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now." She asserted that women are equal to men as rational, independent and autonomous beings. Other notable leaders of this wave include Elizabeth Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan Anthony. The movement bore fruits in 1920 with the 19th Amendment of the US Constitution which granted rights of voting to women. The amendment is sometimes referred to as the "Susan B. Anthony Amendment.", in remembrance of her notable work, as she died before it happened, in 1906.

Although successful, the first wave of feminism had its own drawbacks. It overlooked women of colour, as the 19th Amendment only granted voting rights to white women. It completely excluded women of different races, and they had to wait till the Voting Rights Act of 1965, to have voting rights.

It was in the year 1968, when people associated feminism with waves when Martha Weinman Lear, wrote an article in the New York Times, titled "The Second Feminist Wave." He wrote, "Proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the sandbar of Togetherness". The second wave started roughly in 1960s and ended in 1990s. It was concerned with overcoming cultural obstacles that remained on women's path to equality and justice. The second wave was broader and covered more arenas like workplace equality, sexuality, domestic violence and women's

reproductive rights. Although the term and concept of femininity was already introduced, by a French philosopher, Christine de Pisan, in her book called “The Book of the City of Ladies” in 1405, it was during the second wave of Feminism that Femininity came into the limelight.

Femininity collectively refers to all those characteristics and behaviours that are traditionally associated with women such as sensitivity, softness, grace, and sympathy, among others. In the contemporary sense, Femininity is not a monolithic concept but a multifaceted construct that varies from individual to individual. While Feminism and Femininity are often intertwined these days, the different waves of feminism dealt with femininity differently, while one challenged it, the other supported to embraced it.

Some of the leading text of the second wave includes Germaine Greer’s “The Female Eunuch”, which talks about how women are compelled to align with the ‘norms created as well as popularized by male-dominated society’ and Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” which discusses various ways in which women are relegated to second-class citizens. Inspired by such texts, the second-wave feminists challenged the common characteristics that were associated with womanhood such as intuitive, compassionate, emotional, sensitivity and downplayed femininity while trying to acquire traits that were generally ascribed to men such as rationality, insensitivity, independence etc. Betty Friedan in her book, “The Feminine Mystique”, shed light on the widespread general assumption that women find happiness in doing daily house chores, that women are good only for cooking and producing children. This, she referred to as “the problem that has no name”. She criticised the advertising industry and education system that restricted women to menial monotonous household chores.

In the two decades of the second wave of feminism, feminist activists brought innumerable changes in various fields. They established a range of feminist businesses like women's bookstores, feminist presses, feminist restaurants, and feminist record labels. It also brought a change in the education system with the trend of co-ed colleges and universities. They reinvented pop culture that created a positive image of women with songs like "I Am Woman" and woman-owned record labels. Not only music but films and art also witnessed greater participation and representation of women. Reproductive rights were one of the many things at the forefront of this second wave. Feminists advocated for women to have autonomy over their own bodies. They also drew attention to domestic violence and workplace inequalities. Legislative amendments like the Equal Pay Act (1963), Equal Credit Opportunity Act (1974), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), Women’s Educational Equity Act, and US Supreme

Court rulings including *Roe vs. Wade* and *Miller v. California*, marked the success of second wave of feminism.

By the 1990s, the Third wave of feminism emerged. When it ended, well that is, debatable. Some believe it is still going on, while others believe, the year 2012 marked the fourth wave of feminism. The feminist scholar Elizabeth Evans writes “The confusion surrounding what constitutes third-wave feminism, is in some respects its defining feature.” This wave was largely led by Gen Z, and so their idea and perception of feminism is what shaped the third wave. Particularly, social media played a huge role in social media campaigns like #ToTheGirls, #NoMore, and #MeToo among others. What sets the third wave apart from the previous two is its celebration of femininity along with inclusivity and diversity. Unlike the past-wave feminists, who were trying to compete with and wanted to prove themselves as capable as men, the third-wave feminists altogether rejected the typology of men and women. Bikini Kill lead singer Kathleen Hanna in the Riot Grrrl Manifesto in 1991, writes, “BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak.” For third-wave feminists, being a girl is something empowering in itself, they like being girls. They embraced girliness and embraced all the ideas and behaviors that were generally associated with women and were previously criticized such as makeup, high heels, pop culture, girly aesthetics, etc.

Not only this, but they even claimed and embraced words that were used to label women, to degrade them such as ‘bitch’, ‘slut’, and ‘cunt’, and used them as a liberating tool from patriarchy. The book *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* by Elizabeth Wurtzel published in 1999, claimed the word bitch, and in the current scenario, you must have come across girlies calling their girly friends as bitches or maybe you do too. Another example is the inception of ‘Slutwalks’. The Third Wave media brought strong feminist female characters to the forefront through movies and TV shows like *Thelma & Louise*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Hannah Montana*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Golden Girls*. These characters became role models and cultural icons for Gen Z girls, shaping their ideals and aspirations.

However not introduced in the third wave, the feminists of this wave attempted to reclaim Barbie as a symbol of empowerment and as an expression of femininity. They viewed Barbie as a woman who could take on diverse careers (doctor, astronaut, president) while also embracing beauty and fashion. She is a beauty with brains. The movie *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig, which was released last year, ignited this Barbie culture, with every girl wearing pink to go watch the movie in the theatre. The very pink color was seen as girlish and was until the

third wave, largely not liked by girls themselves. The movie showed Barbies hold all the positions of power in a utopian candy-themed country and Kens are essentially peripheral. The movie smashed box office records, as Gen Z feminists celebrated the movie while others labeled it as ‘antimale’. Moreover, generation X embraced femininity like never before, from using ribbons, wearing pink to standing up for themselves and raising their voice through social media, they did all and like never before.

Although the primary focus of the third wave was on femininity, it did not limit feminism to just that; instead, it broadened the scope to encompass a more inclusive spectrum. Judith Butler in her book titled “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity”, opposed the homogenization of gender, while introducing gender performativity. She explains that gender is not something biological or defined by nature, instead, it is a social or performative construct and further questions the typology of “woman”. Inspired by such texts, the third-wave feminists celebrated diversity and individuality among women, while striving to reshape the typical definition of feminism, which gave way to the concept of Gender continuum. According to it, gender and sex are not binary, as long understood by the society but a range of traits that everyone possesses, which allows the individual to decide how they want to identify themselves, and not the society. This wave is the most inclusive in feminist history, as it allows women to gain support regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Unlike previous waves, where support was typically granted based solely on being a woman, third-wave feminism embraces individuals who identify as bisexual, transgender, lesbian, and more, welcoming them into the feminist movement.