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From silence to Agency: Rewriting the History of Feminism

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***Abstract*—Since past few centuries "Feminism" as a term has evolved in people's lives, resulting in promoting women empowerment and the fundamental rights they deserve. This paper examines the struggle of women through centuries fighting for their basic rights to make a life for themselves, also examining how the historiography of the term feminism has shifted over the past few centuries. Beginning with an account of women's historical exclusion from formal political, legal, and scholarly life, the paper accentuates how the successive waves of feminist activities have globally increased. This paper also traces the shift by which feminist scholarships move. As we go deeper into the study, we would be able to examine the true importance of feminism even in the modern society and what great importance it holds.**

***Index Terms*—Feminism, rights, gender equality, revolution, stereotypes.**

I. INTRODUCTION

A look out through history, feminism as a discipline is quite majorly defined as a radical notion that women are people. Feminism brings many things to philosophy as well not only a variety of particular moral and political claims, but ways of asking and answering questions, critiques of mainstream philosophical views and methods. The term 'Feminism' has many different uses as its meanings are often contested. From early campaigns for women's suffrage and property rights to contemporary discussions surrounding workplace equality, reproductive rights, education, representation, and intersectionality, feminism has continued to expand its scope while remaining a pursuit of gender equality. For generations, the feminist movements has forged ahead advocating for women's rights.

This paper argues that the history of feminism cannot be told simply as a chronology of law passed and rights won, it must instead be understood as a process of historical rewriting of events that shape the world women live in today. Through the historical data and evidences this paper defines women's struggles and fights they have fought even to secure basic rights in the society may it be French Revolution 1789 that began the democratic federation to the Covid 19 pandemic feminism has truly made an exceptional shift of not only the lived experience of women across centuries but

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the methodological shift historians have undergone in how they recover and interpret that entire experience.

II. THE DAWN OF FEMINISM (FIRST WAVE, C. 1848 - 1920)

The First Wave of Feminism was a period of feminist activity and thought that occurred during the 19th and 20th century, particularly securing women's right to vote (suffrage). Spanning the late 1800s to the early 1900s primarily in the United States and United Kingdom.

The movement mainly developed due to several factors, that women during that time went through majorly, factors like ; political exclusion, economic dependence upon their fathers, brothers or any male figure they are associated with, lack of educational opportunities in the society compared to the men, no propertied rights given, unequal marriage law, and also the influence of democratic ideals ("stating all humans are equal"). All these factors eventually led to the major outbreak of Te Seneca Falls Convention (1848), New York eventually leading to the declaration of sentiments, came onto the picture on the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

Many major leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony marked a remarkable stance in the United States, whereas even in the Britain, Emmeline Pankhurst (founder of the women's social and Political Union)

Not only did the activists but also few major led organisations take part in building the foundation of feminism during the period. Organisations like National Women Suffrage Association (NWSA) founded in 1869 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, National Women's Party (NWP) - Founded in 1916 by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns; known for more militant suffrage campaigns, including Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) - founded in 1874; advocated for temperance while also supporting women's suffrage and social reforms. Although feminist ideas predated the 19th century, the Seneca Falls Convention (1848) is widely regarded as the defining event that transformed scattered demands for women's rights.

The first wave of feminism marked a very pivotal turning point in the fight for gender equality. Activists challenging the long standing social and legal barriers by demanding equal rights in education, property ownership, employment and more significantly the right to vote. Nevertheless, the firs laid out the foundation of feminism and pursued the reforms of second, third and fourth waves of feminism.

III. EXPANDING THE STRUGGLE (THE SECOND WAVE OF FEMINISM 1960S - 1980S)

Although the first wave of feminism played a major role in defining the foundation of feminism it did not eliminate the social, economic and cultural inequalities that women faced during the period. The second wave of feminism majorly focused on the issues of inequalities like workplace and educational discrimination including reproductive dependency, and domestic violence and abuse. The wave fought against these issues by the implementation of laws that took part for e.g. the equal pay act of 1963 and title IX in 1972.

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Even few major publications like the Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) is often cited as a spark to the wave - it named "the problem that has no name", the dissatisfaction many suburban housewives felt with domestic violence. The movement grew alongside the civil rights movement, and many activists came out of that organising tradition.

Not only problems like workplace discrimination, domestic violence and sexual harassment and much more, few organisations and figures also played a key role. For e.g. NOW (national organisation for women), founded 1966 by Friedan and others helped empower women.

Also, few other other critiques like the movement is often criticised for centering the concerns of white, middle class, heterosexual women, side lining Black women, working - class women, and lesbians.

The fight did not just end up in the history books; it's the reason third - wave feminists in the '90s had something to build on — and push back against. They look at the movement and said "you're missing people", and brought race, class, and sexuality into the conversation instead of treating gender like it exists on its own. And a lot of what second - wave feminists fought for - equal pay, control over your own body, questioning rigid gender roles — are still very much live debates today.

IV. VOICES WITHOUT BORDERS (THIRD WAVE 1990S - 2000S/ EARLY 2010S)

The third wave of Feminism emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the limitations of the second wave. This wave rejected the idea that there is a single way to be a feminist. Instead, it celebrated individuality, diversity, and intersectionality.

Intersectionality - Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989in the field of critical race theory and Feminist legal Studies. Crenshaw introduced the term while examining how Black women faced discrimination in ways that were different from both white women and Black men. Intersectionality was much needed in the society as it influenced feminism quite widely by broading feminist scholarship, challenging the dominance of western perspectives, making feminist activism more inclusive, and also encouraging collaboration across different social justice movements. By emphasising diversity an inclusion, intersectionality transformed feminist thought by recognising that women experience inequality in different ways. It broadened the scope of feminist to include voices that had often been overlooked and continues to shape academic research, public policies and social justice movements around the world.

Micro - politics and culture — not only did the activist protest through formal yet educational way they also inculcated reclaiming derogate terms, and expressing identity through pop culture and art. Micro - politics and culture as terminology of feminism recognised everyday experiences as political issues, also examined the influence of media and popular culture on gender roles; encouraging women to define femininity on their own terms, even challenging the stereotypes related to beauty, sexuality, and gender expression, all these features defined micro - politics and culture in the third wave of feminism.

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Sex positivity - Sex positivity was of the key concepts of the third wave of feminism quite widely. It promoted the idea that sexuality is a natural and very healthy part of the human life. It majorly emphasised that a woman should not be judged or valued based on their sexual choices, but instead women should have the freedom to decide if, when, add with whom they should engage sexually or associate with.

Having freedom to express themselves and live on their own terms is what was desired through this feature. The key features that it expressed were that consent is very essential in all sexual relationships, women to have the right to make their independent decisions about their body, and to make individuality common where everybody could express themselves or even their sexualities in a consensual and respectful way.

Not only did these features play a major part in the third wave of feminism many activists like Anita Hill were the central foundations of the third wave quite vividly. In 2003, Robin Morgan edited an updated version of her original feminist anthology. Some scholars believe that the third wave never came to end and it still continues till this date, all the campaigns, movements and the hard work that was put through is still practiced till date around the world.

V. THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION (THE FINAL WAVE BUT THE WAR STILL CONTINUES, LATE 2010S - PRESENT DAY)

The Digital Revolution or the fourth wave of feminism's major objectives were

1. Ending Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence
2. Digital Activism
3. Intersectionality
4. Gender equality
5. Body autonomy
6. Challenging gender stereotypes

The Fourth wave of feminism is the current phase of the feminist movements, emerging in the early 2010s with the rapid growth of the digital world and social media across the globe. Unlike the previous waves that widely relied on meetings, newspapers, and organised protests, the fourth wave used major digital platforms and social media.

One of the most major events of the forth wave of feminism was the #MeToo movement that is defined as a social movement as it originated and later spread 85 countries in October 2017. Its main objectives were to raise awareness about sexual harassment and assault, encourage survivors to speak openly, promote safer workplace, schools, and public places.

Important figures of the forth wave of feminism are Tarana Burke, Emma Watson, Malala Yousafzai, also Kimberlé Crenshaw (through the continued influence of intersectionality)

Also, as the forth wave of feminism was under a major influence of technology it became for women to stand against the inequalities, but many achievements like increasing global awareness of sexual harassment and assault, strengthening public discussions and much more.

Not only did the factors mentioned above affect the wave but the fourth also quite differ from the previous waves by the objectives like digital activism, combating sexual harassment and violence, constant, accountability, and global intersectional feminism also played a role making this wave different then the initial ones.

The fourth wave of feminism is a example of how social movements evolve with changing times. From the fights for basically legal and fundamental rights in the 19th century to the use of digital platforms for global advocacy. Today, feminism is indeed adapting to the continuous changes in the society of mankind. Although there have been significant changes in the society for women, there are few sections of the society that still needs a proper advocated version of feminism to be discussed and significant progress and changes have been made. We cannot ignore the fact that there are still few struggles for equality that reminds us that feminism is not merely a moment of the past, but a continuing pursuit of justice, inclusion, and equal opportunity for all.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although there has been a significant change of perspective in the society for feminism, we still cannot deny the fact that even today there are few sections of the society that have not granted the rightful rights to the women. Throughout the history women had to fight their way through even for the basic fundamental rights, but feminists, activists and people have proven that justice is gained through hard work and the major four waves of feminism have quite justified it.

Many women fought against injustice, violence and fights and made their way into the glorious history books defining true sense of femininity and feminism. Women like Malala Yousafzai, Marie curie, Jane Austen, Emma Watson, Mary Astell, Savitribai Phule, Naomi wolf, and many more have collectively represented the evolution of feminism from the earliest calls of women's education and legal rights to today's focus on intersectionality, Digital activism, and global gender equality.

As new challenges, continue emerge, feminism remains a dynamic and evolving movement that seeks to create a world where every individual, regardless of gender, has the freedom, opportunity, and respect to realise that full potential. As Malala Yousafzai once quoted " we cannot all succeed in half of us are held back". This enduring message serves as a reminder that the pursuit of equality is not solely a woman's cause, but a shared responsibility essential to the progress of the society as a whole.