Feminism through the Ages

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Feminism, as a social movement, has a unique fluidity to it. Born as a natural antithesis to a manmade society, it has an almost divine quality: a testament to the Olympian bravery against the Titans. And in typical Olympian fashion, the movement has a rather convoluted ancestry full of ties white and black.

These ties matter today, perhaps, more than ever. Being a feminist is no longer the be-all-end-all of the point. In a web of subreddits and Twitter threads, these ties serve a higher purpose than just one's broad perspective. Not just constrained to feminism, each strand of an ideology distinguishes itself in its differing emphases. Understanding and presenting one's stance, the values one espouses, and the company online one associates with has become a matter of self-expression which translates into self-identification. Consequently, it has become increasingly critical to acquaint oneself with how one's domain of interest has evolved epistemologically. This is why a scrutiny of the evolution of the feminist movement is so crucial.

While "feminism" as a term has been credited to the 19th-century utopian socialist Charles Fourier, the belief has prevailed long before the terminology. Feminist figures have blessed mythos and history globally, sometimes indistinguishably. From Eurydice to St Joan of Arc, the popular heroines were revered for their selflessness in defending their husbands and countrymen. Their heroism, their divinity lies in their selfless virtues. Like Penelope, who remained chaste till her husband, Odysseus, returned or Rani Padmini, who would rather immolate herself than become the wife of the enemy emperor — their status is associated with their courage and devotion to the men in their lives. I confess, my argument may be generously prone to essentialism, but you do not have to take my word for it.

The First Wave of Feminism, roughly spanning from the late 1880s to the 1920s (depending on the respective countries), was the first consolidated movement for equal rights for women in

Europe and the United States. The most famous of these, the Women's Suffrage Movement, was the struggle for voting rights for women. Virtually spanning across the globe, the movement of Universal Suffrage incarnated itself distinctly based on which women each government perceived to actually deserve voting rights. For example, in South Africa, voting rights were initially reserved for white women over the age of 21 in 1930, whereas in Norway and the Isle of Man, voting rights were reformed to be contingent on women's property ownership or membership in a male tax-paying household. In 1893, New Zealand became the first instance of equal voting rights for women, and by the mid-20th century, most of the world caught up as well.

Professor Judith Lorber's "Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics" is a seminal work on the major developments in feminist theory over the 20th and 21st centuries. She highlights the crucial distinction in the Second Wave of Feminism movements in the 1960s and '70s. These decades saw the rise of Liberal Feminism, an ideology that believes in the equality of men and women as human beings. It questioned the gender norms set in stone that dictated the employment alternatives as well as the healthcare and education available to men and women. While promoting abortion rights and women's entry into traditionally male-dominated fields, the movement also focused on easing the barriers to entry for men into teaching, hospitality, and care-work.

One of the major criticisms of the First Wave was its exclusivity to middle-class, white women. Two variants of Liberal Feminism – Socialist and Development feminisms – aimed to make feminism accessible to women irrespective of their classes, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. These were also the first instances of introducing the much-needed intersectionality in feminist movements across the globe.

Marxist & Socialist Feminism scrutinized the role of women's labor in the capitalist society. It theorizes that the fact that women deal with domestic work is an aspect of bourgeoisie privilege, enabling the capitalists to work more efficiently. However, regardless of class, this domestic work was not considered as economically productive labor. Women's status was ascribed to literal baby-makers when it was all hunky-dory and "reserve labor" when the economy was in the dumps. Moreover, the so-called "market-determined" wages, more often than not, were heavily influenced by gender and ethnic discrimination. A lower pay to women justified their role as secondary workers, creating a feedback loop of gender oppression. The questions raised more than 60 years ago still remain relevant and largely unsolved today.

Taking it up a notch, Development Feminism studied the economic exploitation of women in a post-colonial world. In developing countries ravaged by foreign rule for decades, there was naturally a dearth of access to resources to the natives. Women could be seen as doubly oppressed under the colonial as well as patriarchal frameworks. The only way to get oneself heard was access to the proverbial conch — control over economic resources. Primarily, women's control over essential resources and activities like food production earned them a position in the community, giving them the bargaining power to demand equal rights. However, these ideas did not go uncontested. When adopting the feminist model in a post-colonial setting, many argued that it is crucial to "epistemologically decolonize" one's theory. Simply put, inquire why women demand certain rights — is it based on combating cultural injustice in the community, or is it stemming from aping the West to seek cultural validation?

While the movements of the 1960s were introspective and optimistic about affecting change, this sentiment was lost in its successive decade. In part fuelled by the era's dismal politics, feminism in the 1970s was all about Gender-Resistant or Radical Feminism. This faction of feminism was built upon the idea that women have no place in universal fraternity: it is pointless for a woman to attempt to squeeze into a space that was never meant for her. Radical Feminism took a stronger stance on the incumbent socio-political inequalities. It focused on the dark side of the patriarchy—including how male aggression and violence lead to a systemic objectification and sexual exploitation of women. It, quite commendably, explored themes then considered taboo like sexual abuse, domestic violence, prostitution, and pornography. The movement expanded beyond political rights to the societal perception of gender in general.

Its variant, Cultural Feminism, laid the foundations for critiquing heteronormativity and the dangerous dichotomy in gendered social behaviors (think, men=violence and women=delicateness). However, it has been criticized for the very same reasons, for propagating this toxic narrative while glossing over the real classist and ethnic nuances. Consequently, it only distanced male and socially marginalized allies, which in turn, did not bode well for the movement altogether.

Lesbian Feminism was Radical and Cultural feminisms on crack. On the extremely, well, extreme end of the spectrum, lesbian feminism is what a drunken rom-com cliché sounds like: who needs men at all? In all seriousness, it was one of the most remarkable instances of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in feminist dialogue. But that is where the praise ends. Born out of

resistance to the male side of the "gender dichotomy," lesbian feminism perceived bisexual women as a threat to their ideas.

The 1980s and '90s can be seen as a movement consisting of a collation of all the pluses of its predecessors. For instance, Revolutionary Feminism attempted to destabilize the incumbent social values. It involved Multiethnic Feminism, which took into account the cultural and gendered domination of women. Instead of condemning, it platformed women's cultural products, especially the mundane aspects of their domestic lives. Men's Feminism investigated the other side of the patriarchy. Connell's gender theory on masculinity and femininity has been pivotal in assessing the social deconstruction of gender. Most notably, the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity, which pertains to white, cis-gendered heterosexual men, helped recognize the patriarchal dividend of male advantage. It has also been pivotal in understanding stereotypical male behaviors like involvement in the military and sports and their pattern of denigrating fellow men to establish dominance. Homosexual Theory goes further by explaining how the pattern changes while interacting with non-conventional men and how it translates into a male hierarchy that is ultimately still very oppressive towards women.

Early 2000s feminism continued on the tradition of rediscovering and unraveling the previous systems. The Third Wave of Feminism started from scratch in their introspection of the movement, eventually keeping certain aspects of its skeptical predecessors. Social Construction Feminism is built on the idea that gender is a social construct. Inequality is an inseparable component of gender; it is built upon this social difference. This disparity has oft been used as a justification for the unfair treatment of gender and sexual minorities. It made a distinction between the biological sex, gender identity, and sexuality of individuals. The male-female dichotomy has excluded intersex, non-binary, genderfluid, and trans individuals for centuries. However, this additional layer of gender to sex has not been taken well by certain groups of feminists. Postmodern Feminism & Queer Theory go the furthest in challenging the gender dichotomy. It recognizes gender as a social behavior; that is, you belong to the gender you clothe yourself in society. This is termed the Performative Theory of Gender.

However, this idea is not universally popular, even among gender rights activists. Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism does not recognize a distinction between gender and biological sex. It believes that such a distinction is just a convenient loophole for "taking advantage of women." Even within the trans community, differing attitudes and bigotry have strained ties. For instance, transmedicalism advocates that only those individuals who have successfully transitioned into their desired genders are "valid." Alternatively, it deems

transsexuals as "true" transgender individuals, invalidating the identity of others in the community.

This decade also saw extensive progress in gender vocabulary and awareness. The recognition of not just homosexuals and bisexuals but also pansexuals, demisexuals, and asexuals, among others, has helped individuals who have been elbowed out of the conversation till now to meaningfully interpret and relate their lived experiences in feminism. Normalization of these terms and the integration of specific pronouns have vastly improved the inclusion of non-heterosexual and trans individuals into mainstream society.

However, with new debates and terminologies cropping up at light speed, today's feminism has grown increasingly convoluted. A common critique of left-liberals is this insistence on dissecting and compartmentalizing ideas into an impossible number of categories. With the interplay of political, philosophical, and economic ideologies, different conditions suit people differently. How much of it would stand the test of time and actually affect change remains to be seen.

But that's a discussion for another time.