

The Ambivalent Woman: The Ambiguities of Liberal Feminism

Feminism is an ever-evolving concept. Feminism, as a force, burgeoned with the conception of traditional Liberal feminism. However, in contemporary feminist studies, the effectiveness of Liberal feminism has been widely scrutinized ever since awareness about issues surrounding race, class, sexuality, culture, and privilege permeated the realm of feminism. Liberal feminism seeks to end the visible forms of discrimination against women by arguing for women's access to the public sphere. However, its emphasis on the public sphere is often ignorant of the oppression stemming from race, class, and sexuality and is based on the vilification of femininity which inadvertently reinforces patriarchal values. Thus, Liberal feminism forms an ambivalent relationship with feminism—while it is fighting for women's fundamental rights, it often ends up reproducing the hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. By studying the arguments of traditional Liberal feminists Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor, I will examine how Liberal feminism has evolved—its concerns and its implications. I will establish that Liberal feminists produce an ambivalent argument that attempts to eradicate visible forms of discrimination against women but often ends up undermining women's position in society.

Before we can understand contemporary feminist concerns with Liberal Feminism, we must examine what Liberal feminism is and how it came into being. Liberal feminism emerged during the first-wave feminist movement which began around the mid 19th century. It stems from Liberalism, a political philosophy which holds the belief that human beings are born with certain natural rights, such as the rights to life, autonomy, and property ownership. Liberalism states that it is evident by Nature that *men* are entitled to certain rights and that individual autonomy should be emphasized while limiting the power of the state. As the Declaration of Independence, which was founded on Liberal principles, states:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one *people* to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them...We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all *men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights (“Declaration of Independence: A Transcription”; my emphasis).

According to Rosemarie Tong, “Liberals justify the Western system of individual rights as constituting a framework within which each person can choose a particular set of goods, provided one does not deprive the others of theirs” (12). Thus, Liberals believe that each individual has the natural right to autonomy and towards the pursuit of happiness, as long as they don’t infringe on other people’s autonomy or happiness. The idea is that in a just society, rights take precedence over a supposed good since the idea of ‘good’ is difficult to define and varies across individuals.

Interestingly, the Declaration of Independence starts with urging “people” to claim their equal station in society and in a few lines the idea of natural rights starts to pivot around “men.” When Liberalism was conceived, only men were seen as individuals. Hence, the natural conclusion that followed was that women were seen as less than ‘people’ in this supposedly just society. If the belief is that rights come from God or Nature, then the grave implication is that God or Nature has made women inferior and, hence they are excluded from these rights. This ideology has been used to confine women to the domestic sphere, denying them rights to education, employment, and voting. The common rationale behind this was that women are naturally intellectually inferior to men and are better suited for the demands of private and domesticated life.

Liberal feminism emerged amidst such baseless beliefs and sought to extend the values of Liberalism to women. It demands equality between men and women in the public domain. Thus,

Liberal feminists advocate that women should have access to the public sphere—equal education, equal employment opportunities, equal pay, and equal rights. They seek to establish equality by working within the system and hope to initiate positive change through legislative measures and redistribution of resources. To assert their arguments, many Liberal feminists dismantle the Declaration of Independence and subverts its political language to raise a simple question: on what basis are the women excluded from the idea of natural rights?

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft dissects this very question. She argues that “it should seem, [that by] allowing [women] to have souls, there should be but one way appointed by Providence to lead *mankind* to either virtue or happiness” (1). Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on ‘*mankind*’ is a subversion of the Declaration of Independence for here she integrates women into the definition of mankind. She dispels the idea that God has created women to be inferior, saying that the fact that women have souls means they have the potential to acquire virtue and happiness. The “one way,” according to her, that leads to virtue and happiness is the exercise of reason which can only be cultivated through education. According to Wollstonecraft, women are inferior because “women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind” because they “have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement” (1). She also says that women’s inferiority is a false idea perpetrated to excuse the tyranny of men, thereby undermining Liberalist beliefs of equality. She thus exposes Liberalism as a flawed system that perpetuates inequalities by denying women education.

Advocating for women’s equal right to education, Wollstonecraft says that men behave unphilosophically when they force the “good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood” (1). In a clever attempt, she challenges men’s insecurities who feel only as powerful as far they can suppress women. However, Wollstonecraft is writing in a time

where the patriarchy is too powerful to dismantle, hence, she has to bargain with the very men she's accusing of tyranny. Shifting gears, Wollstonecraft states that the current system of education teaches women from their infancy "cunning, softness of temper, [and] *outward* obedience" (1). The italicized term '*outward*' forms the basis of Wollstonecraft's argument—uneducated women are only outwardly virtuous while inwardly they are shrewd and cunning, trying to gain an "illegitimate power" by wielding "the arbitrary power of beauty" (2). She thus advocates for equal education saying "there must be equality established in the society or morality will never gain ground" (3). She argues that society is conditioning a flawed woman which contradicts the ideal of the perfectly virtuous woman. She says "it is farce to call a being virtuous whose virtues don't result from the exercise of its own reason" (2). We see a burgeoning sense of ambivalence in her arguments as Wollstonecraft ultimately vilifies her own sex to appease the patriarchal mindset.

Saying that "education gives [the] appearance of weakness to women," Wollstonecraft faults the current system of education for producing unnatural distinctions in the society (2). Once again, she terms the inequality as 'unnatural,' challenging the Declaration of Independence which states the rights of human beings are based on natural equality among men. She captures the essence of Liberal feminism saying "let woman share the rights [with men] and she will emulate the virtues of men" (5). In a single statement, she creates an ambivalent idea of feminism. As she is arguing for her sex, she also simultaneously belittles women and puts the perpetrators, that are, men, on a pedestal. As Tong notes: "Wollstonecraft never questioned the value of traditional male traits. On the contrary, she simply assumed that they were good and traditional female traits were rationally and morally deficient" (15). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argues that the current education is producing flawed women who are actually detrimental to patriarchal beliefs. Uneducated women fail to become compatible partners for enlightened men and fail to raise an

educated family. Hence, it is only in the interest of the patriarchal society, that we provide women with equal education and rights.

Wollstonecraft's argument, though often filled with counter-intuitive ideas, was revolutionary for the 18th century. Committing to true Liberal feminist thought, Wollstonecraft employed clever language to work from within the patriarchy and thus establish, at the very least, rhetorical advocacy for equal rights and opportunities for women. Harriet Taylor, who was writing *Enfranchisement of Women* in 1849, takes up a lot of Wollstonecraft's ideas and extends them to express more substantial feminist thinking. While Wollstonecraft is mainly concerned with access to education, Taylor advocates for full integration of women into the public sphere— "their admission, in law and in fact, to equality in all rights, political, civil, and social with the male citizens of the community" (86).

Taylor's main argument is built upon the idea of meritocracy, which suggests that everybody has an equal opportunity to succeed given everybody is provided with equal access to education, labour market, equal remuneration, and legislation. She argues for women's representation in the legislation saying that "it is one of the fundamental doctrines of the British Constitution that all persons should be tried by their peers; yet women, whenever tried, are tried by male judges and a male jury" (87). Hence, Taylor, like Wollstonecraft, subverts the political language of Liberalist ideas to argue that oppression and exclusion of women are essentially unconstitutional. Taylor attributes the exclusion of women from the public sphere to the idea of 'custom.' She says: "women never have had equal rights with men. The claim in their behalf, of the common rights of mankind, is looked upon as barred by universal practice" (88). Therefore, it is deemed customary that "the proper sphere of women is not politics or publicity but private and domestic life" (88). She attributes the origin of this misinformed custom to the idea of *physical*

force. Taylor says the rule of physical force was used to define the general law of human affairs for a long time (88). However, she cites how slavery, monarchical despotism, and religious intolerance are instances of previously upheld customs that are now being dismantled and eradicated under Liberalist beliefs. The society has recently come to be founded on the laws of equality yet the unequal relations between men and women have remained stagnant.

She thus says that the proper sphere for any individual is the “largest and highest that they are able to attain,” thereby introducing the idea of meritocracy in her argument (88). However, even after deducing that women are oppressed by custom and the patriarchy, Taylor, says that the oppression of women is ultimately detrimental to the society as a whole for the society blocks out half of its population from becoming useful members. Taylor also says that the division of mankind “into two castes, one born to rule over the other, is...in all cases, an unqualified mischief, a source of perversion and demoralization, both to the favored class and to those at whose expense they were favored” (87). Thus, like Wollstonecraft, she too suggests that the distinctions between men and women are unnatural and regressive for society. She says “let every occupation be open to all, without favor or discouragement to any, and employment will fall into the hands of those men or women who are found by experience to be most capable of worthily exercising them” (88). It seems that Taylor and Wollstonecraft understand that the patriarchal rule finds its roots in the fear and insecurity of men who are afraid of losing out on power. Thus, they both argue that men have nothing to be afraid of, in fact, men stand to gain from women’s emancipation for these women go on to become better members of the society.

Rosemarie Tong notes: Liberal feminism believes “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women’s entrance to and success in the public sphere” (2). Wollstonecraft and Taylor both echo this idea. But is traditional Liberal feminism

robust enough to undo the oppression of women that is deeply embedded into the system of our world? It turns out that just as Liberal feminism fights against the exclusion of women from the definition of ‘human rights,’ Liberal feminism too excludes certain groups of women from its definition of ‘woman.’ Wollstonecraft believes that denying women access to education hinders their ability to reason and thereby produces an unnatural distinction in the society between strong men and weak women (2). Similarly, Taylor says that “division of mankind into two castes” is an “unqualified mischief, a source of perversion and demoralization” (87). The fact that the only division they have to worry about is the one between men and women alludes to Wollstonecraft and Taylor’s privilege where they are only affected by the binary division in the world. It also points us towards one of the criticisms of Liberal feminism, that is, it provides an inadequate study into the oppression stemming from race, sexuality, and class. While mankind is mainly divided between “two castes” there are also many subdivisions—based on race, class, and sexuality, etc.—that oppress people. This is the idea behind intersectionality, which states that to properly treat the oppression of women, “we must understand it as situated within a grander matrix of interlocking and overlapping oppressions” (Tong 30).

According to Tong, many feminist critics criticize Liberal feminism for focusing mainly on the interests of upper and middle-class, heterosexual, white women (35). Traditional Liberal feminism fails to factor in other forms of oppression women have to face produced by several distinctions other than that between men and women. Liberal feminism believes that access to the public sphere will have a trickle-down effect and emancipate women in every way. But it studies one archetypal woman who fails to address disparities surrounding race, class, culture, and sexuality between women. For instance, like Wollstonecraft and Taylor, Betty Friedan who, in the mid-20th century, reintroduces Liberal feminist arguments in *The Feminine Mystique* is mainly

concerned with the suburban housewives' access to education and employment. These housewives are supported by their husbands and can afford care for their children. Freidan later realized that many single mothers sometimes have to work out of necessity and can't afford help for their children as opposed to wealthy mothers driving to a PTA meeting who formed Friedan's primary audience (Tong 35). Access to the public sphere only represents the tip of the iceberg in feminist thought with issues regarding class, race, culture, sexuality, domestic abuse, motherhood, and internalized misogyny forming the bottom half of the iceberg. Liberal feminism remains significant because denying women equal opportunities in the public sphere is a visible form of discrimination and prejudice. However, it becomes ambivalent in its advocacy for it ignores the invisible and intersectional forms of discrimination that still prevent women from attaining full autonomy even after equal opportunities are granted in the public domain.

Another criticism of Liberal feminism is that it faults femininity and fails to reclaim it. Femininity—the quality of being a woman attained negative connotations in early feminism as being the reason for the oppression of women. Since Liberal feminists were fighting the Liberalist idea of women's natural inferiority, they overemphasized male values and decided that autonomy and masculinity are synonymous. But femininity, as contemporary feminism has come to understand, is something to be celebrated. More importantly, women's autonomy should not be contingent upon whether they are more like men. Liberal Feminism fails to displace men from the pedestal that the patriarchy has set them on. In fact, it often unwittingly reinforces patriarchal ideologies by extensively vilifying traditional ideas of femininity, mostly because Liberal feminists believe women are coerced into domestication which is an emblem of femininity. When examined closely, we see that traditional Liberal feminist thought edges dangerously close to

internalizing the misogyny and rewarding the patriarchy—both institutions that feminism seeks to eradicate.

For instance, Wollstonecraft argues “it is reasonable to suppose that [women] will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral and civil sense” (5). Here, Gubar notes: “repeatedly and disconcertingly, Wollstonecraft associates femininity with weakness, childishness, cunning” and the “feminine principle so defined threatens to contaminate...and destroy men and their culture” (456). Wollstonecraft thus paints women as “cunning, envious dependents” and implies that the society should be more like men (3). Taylor who is writing decades after Wollstonecraft does hint towards the flawed ideology of her epoch saying that the patriarchy oppresses women because that is how “men like it” (89). However, she too says that women’s oppression is leading men towards a “progressive deterioration” and that men are “falling into the feebleness they have long cultivated in [women]” (89). While it is a clever rhetorical technique, since she’s attacking men’s insecurities by calling them effeminate, but she too vilifies womanhood to show that oppressed women are a detriment to the patriarchy. She says that when women are given access to the public sphere they would prove to be intellectual companions to their husbands and can aid the advancement of their wisdom (90). Hence, traditional Liberal feminists often condemn themselves to make allies out of their oppressors, stating that women want everything that men want. But Jean Bethke Elshtain denies the Liberal feminist “view that any woman who *wants* to be only a wife and mother is a benighted and befuddled victim of patriarchal ‘false consciousness’” (Tong 33; my emphasis). African-American, political theorist Angela Davis commented that a significant number of women of African descent experience the housewife role as liberating rather than oppressive (35). Thus, Liberal feminism is charged with condemning femininity as oppressive and masculinity as

liberating. Again, Liberal feminism runs the risk of generalizing women. However, the keyword in all of this is ‘want.’ ‘Want’ implies choice—the choice that Liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft and Taylor were fighting for. We cannot ignore the context of the time in which these texts were written since being a housewife was not a choice back then. So naturally, they felt the need to condemn that idea to free themselves of their domesticated lives. Thus, if there was one word that all ideas of feminism—from Liberal to materialist—boil down to, it is choice.

This brings us back to the introduction: feminism is an ever-evolving concept and we should treat it as such. Just because today women have a choice between becoming a homemaker or becoming a doctor, doesn’t mean they always did. Liberal feminism proved to be an effective starting point for feminist thinking. And frankly, women are still denied complete access to the public sphere, so that always remains a concern. However, feminism, as we understand it today, means that women’s emancipation is an end in itself and femininity is something to be celebrated. Women don’t need to be like men and it doesn’t matter if women’s education or employment benefits their husband or family—it benefits women and that is enough. Liberal feminism accounts for visible forms of misogyny, but we have to recognize that misogyny goes beyond the public sphere—it is deeply embedded in our ideologies. Thus, once we recognize the ambivalence of Liberal feminist thinking, we can build our ideas of feminism upon access, choice, and autonomy, catering to every possible sense of these terms.

Works Cited

- “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.” *National Archives*,
www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript. Accessed 25 November 2019.
- Gubar, Susan. “Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of ‘It Takes One to Know One.’” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1994, pp. 452-473. JSTOR,
www.jstor.org/stable/3178182. Accessed 20 September 2019.
- Taylor, Harriet. “Enfranchisement of Women.” *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, McGraw-Hill, 2013, pp 86-91.
- Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. E-book, Routledge, 2018.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Ebook, New York: Bartleby.com, 1999.