

Marxist Feminism: An Overview

Hāsanat Jahan*

Abstract

(Feminist theories describe, explain, and analyze the conditions of women's lives. The basic issue that has concerned feminist theories is, depending on the terms one prefers, women's inequality, subordination, or domination by men. Marxism rejected the popular hypothesis that women remain dominated under the males from the very beginning of human civilization. Through historical analysis Marxism explained that, with the emergence of class in human society, women became suppressed under the dominant males. As such from Marxist view point the basis of women's exploitation is closely linked with and rooted in the introduction of class exploitation in human society. This paper attempts to analyze Marxian view of feminism and its meaning)

Feminist theory is a body of writing that attempts to describe, explain, and analyze the conditions of women's lives. According to Charlotte Bunch, feminist theory is "a way of viewing the world", it "provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives" (Bunch: 1987). Contemporary sociological theory has greatly been influenced by the development of *feminist theory*. The basic issue that has concerned feminist theory is, depending on the terms one prefers, women's inequality, subordination, or domination by men. At the root of these, is the issue of gender asymmetry-the designation of women and things associated with women as different from inferior to, or lesser value than men and things associated with men. Feminist theory examine and try to explain the causes and conditions in which men are more powerful and men's production, ideas, and activities are seen as having greater value and higher status than women's. For many feminist theorists this means, examining and explaining all structures of domination, whether based on gender, race, class, age, sexuality, nation, or some other differences. (Kolmar & Bartkowski: 1999)

In the earliest history of human civilization, mother was the key figure in a group surrounding whom all group activities were performed. But in the stream of time due to demand of the emerging economic system in the social set up, patriarchy evolved by replacing matriarchal system. As a consequence, male became the dominant key figure in family and society. Since the emergence of patriarchy, women community in human society became subordinated under patriarchy and failed to upgrade their social position till now. .

Marxian sociologists have tended to bypass the family in their preoccupations with social class. Like many 19th century scholars, Engels took an evolutionary view of the family, attempting to trace its origin and evolution through time. He

* Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Central Women's University, Dhaka

combined an evolutionary approach with Marxian theory arguing that as the mode of production changed, so did the family. During the early stage of human evolution, Engels believed that the forces of production were communally owned and the family as such did not exist. This era of 'primitive communism' was characterized by promiscuity. Engels argued that throughout man's history, more and more restrictions were placed on sexual relationships and production of children. He speculated that from the promiscuous horde, marriage and family evolved through a series of stages which included polygamy to its present stage of the monogamous nuclear family. Each successive stage placed greater restrictions on the number of mates available to the individual. The monogamous nuclear family developed with the emergence of private property, in particular private ownership of the means of production, and the advent of the state. The state instituted law to protect the system of private property and to enforce the rules of monogamous marriage. This form of marriage and the family developed to solve the problem of inheritance of private property. Property was owned by males and in order to pass it on their heirs, they must be certain of the legitimacy of those heirs. They therefore needed greater control over women so there would be no doubt about the paternity of their off springs. The monogamous family according to the Marxist feminist theory provided the most efficient device for this purpose. In Engels word " It is based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into the father's property as his natural heirs"

The issues like women's liberation, social emancipation of women, equality of men and women came forward with the advancement of human civilization. During the period of renaissance in the 19th century, aforesaid issues received priorities. In the light of the emergence of 19th century rational thinking, the increasing demand for equality of women gained social approval. Prior to 19th century no thoughtful discussion on *suppression of women* or *women's liberation* could be traced, and the common notion was, women were born to be dominated by males and will continue to do so. So the question which came up in the new century was not on women's liberation or not on how to ensure equal status of women in society, rather, to find out a way to what extent they could sympathetically be looked upon.

Men have used the ideology expressed in "biology is destiny" to create and maintain systems of sex inequality in which they dominate. The concept of patriarchy is used to refer to such system (Neubeck & Glasberg 1996). Not only domination but oppression and exploitation are common themes in societies characterized by patriarchy. According to this ideology, biological difference between the sexes require that there be a sexual division of labor, in which men and women take on responsibility for the tasks that each is most capable of performing. Hence, since women bear children, female biology dictates that they

are most fit for child rearing and caretaking roles in the home. The home is said to be the best place for those whom nature has decreed the "weaker sex". Just as systems of economic inequality and racial inequality have ideologies justifying their existence, so too system of sex inequality Sex inequality steams from the notion that "biology is destiny," that biological differences between the sexes require that the sex play very different societal role (K.L. Neuback & D.S. Glasberg).

Males and females obviously do differ biologically. Their genetic make-up is not the same, anatomical differences are apparent, and their hormones perform different functions. But how much social importance should we attach to such differences? To answer this question, it is necessary to make a distinction between sex and gender.

Sex refers to the fundamental biological characteristics that cause a person to be categorized as either a female or a male. These characteristics are genetically determined. Rarely there is ambiguity as to the sex of any given newborn once the baby's physical traits are established. Moreover, sex difference remains the same from society to society.

Gender, on the other hand, is a social construction, much like 'race.' Gender refers to the ways of behaving and relating to others those members of society expects of two sexes. It refers to the different roles that males and females are expected to play. Gender is learned, whereas sex is biologically inherited. As such the behaviors associated with gender, differ in various respects from society to society. (Martin and Vorrhies 1975).

This ideology suggests that the need for the species to reproduce promulgate yet another important role for women being sexually attractive. Women thus play an important function when they strive to be, and allow themselves to be treated as sex objects. This is all in line with nature's grand design (Neubeck & Glasberg 1996).

The ideology that 'the biology is destiny,' spills over into the workplace and other institutional arenas outside the home. The rigidity of this ideology has begun to erode, but most people still accept the view that there are "men's jobs" and "women's jobs".

Critics of the ideology and the restrictions it imposes on women's life chances, include Feminist and their supporters. Feminists underscore the difference between sex and gender, pointing out that the roles accorded to women are largely of men's making. Women alone are capable of bearing children, but men are as capable as women in playing a nurturant role. Nor are there reasons to restrict women to the home, out of concern that they are the weaker sex. Given the opportunity, women can fulfill virtually any position in work and politics that is presently male dominated. Similarly men are eminently capable of doing women's work in the labor force. Finally, current social conditions make it clear that women can and must be able to support themselves.

Feminists also question the notion that women must make themselves desirable to men in order to ensure reproduction of the species. Standards of beauty and attractiveness tend to be set by the dominant group. Most women are unable to meet this standard, but there are always some who can or can at least meet them better than others.

Marxist feminism:

One of the theoretical trends in Feminist movement is Marxist feminism. The theoretical basis on which Marxist Feminist theory evolved is the book entitled "Family, Private Property and the State" by Engels. This book was first published in 1884. Marxist feminism views Capitalism and Patriarchy as inseparable. One supplements the other. According to this view private ownership of property is the root cause of women's exploitation. As such, with the abolition of private property, women's exploitation can only be abolished. Marxist feminism opines that, like laborer in Capitalism, women are also being equally exploited. Equality of men and women is only possible when the exploitative social structure could be replaced by a society based on equality of persons.

Engels stated in this regard "That women were the slave of man at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us from the period of enlightenment of the eighteenth century" (Engels: 1967ed.) This customary wrong and vulgar notion shaped the idea that the domination of women is not unnatural. As a consequence, males gradually started thinking themselves superior to females and that the females are their slaves. This notion which historically persisted is an unscientific idea which hindered the attempts or movements in the 19th century in favor of women's liberation.

The development of capitalism paved the way for social recognition of women's individualism which is a product of 19th century enlightenment. In the middle of the 19th century, with the development of Marxism, Marx and Engels for the first time from historical view point scientifically analyzed the reasons for the subordinate position of women in society and asserted that, the only way for women's emancipation is the establishment of a classless society.

In Marxian theory based on Dialectical and Historical materialism, the reasons for women's subjugation and their emancipation has been scientifically analyzed and explained. Prior to that, no scientific attempts had been made for the understanding of the problem. Marxism rejected the popular hypothesis that women remained subjugated under the males from the very beginning of human society. In the primitive era when class division of the rulers and the ruled in human society was non existent, exploitation of man over man could not take place. At that stage of human civilization, men and women all were treated equal in the society and it has been proved beyond doubt that women enjoyed high-

status, influential position in the society. At the initial stage of human civilization, for long, matriarchal social system prevailed where females were the central figure in all social and family activities. In the Barbaric era of civilization, women community really had very high status in society. "The social status of the lady of civilization surrounded by sham homage and estranged from all real work, is socially infinitely lower than that of the hardworking woman of barbarism. who was regarded among her people as a real lady, (lady, frowa, Frau-Mistress [Herrin]) and was such by the nature of her position."(Stalin:1943).

With the stream of time, the process of history gradually developed a social system where women became enchained with the development of class based society and became an object of exploitation, a tradition which still is continuing. Through historical analysis Marxism viewed that, with the emergence of class in human society, women became suppressed under the dominant males. As such from Marxist view point the basis of women's exploitation is closely linked with and rooted in with the introduction of class exploitation in human society. The very introduction of economic exploitation of one class of people by another class resulted in the lowering of status of women. Prior to effective imposition of male patriarchy upon society several millennium ago, almost all the major mythology of the world defined a matriarchal society substantially quite different from that which followed. All the archeological evidences of those distant ages suggest it was "her" rule which predominated. Difference is as easy conceived as the difference between Venus then Goddess of beauty and the Mars the God of war. Competition replaced cooperation.

The Neolithic was the golden age of matriarchy and all ancient myths and civilizations pay tribute to the great Goddess until in the 4th millennium B.C. Christianity changed the myth., Patriarchy criticized the Priestesses, and denied women the possibility of being sacred. These are depicted in several ancient myths such as for example as depicted in the Sumerian myth of Lylith Lylith was handmaiden to the Sumerian Goddess Inara. To enter into the figure of Lylith, is to remember a time in the ancient past when women were honored and praised for initiating and fully expressing their personal freedom and sexual passion.

Lylith brought in the men from the fields to the temple at Erech for the sacred sexual customs. As Adam's wife, Lylith refused to be under him and thus she was banished by the patriarchy. Lylith was not the shy retiring type; Sumerian Lylith was transformed by the Judaic texts and folk tales into the essence of depraved sexuality. The Greek Pandora and Christian Eve were both created by patriarchy to represent evilness and disobedience when what they wanted to achieve knowledge and illumination.

According to the father of the Christian Church, women should be docile and innocent like the Virgin Mary. But according to Gnostic text, it was Eve and not God who created Adam out of clay and blood and her name meant "life, thought

of light and good spirit." Christianity transformed the myth and Eve was deprived of her power to create and became just a receptacle for pregnancy and painful birth and this became destiny for women for centuries.

The manipulation of original myths had disastrous consequences for the psychology of women always full of guilt for their sexual energy, for their eagerness for wisdom. They were denied their conscience of their energy and power.

Thus, due to gradual shift of dominance in the society in favor of the males, women lost their control and status and were removed from productive social works. Women as a class were forced to confine themselves in household works under the dominant males. The root cause of class exploitation could be traced in the introduction of private property. With the introduction of agriculture in human society, surplus production became eminent. This surplus production gradually started concentrating in the hands of the few as private property and majority of the people gradually became slaves under the propertied class. During this period of human history, women were forced to fall back on household works under the all powerful patriarch, and were segregated from greater social production. In consequence, women were compelled to become dependent on males for their survival, Thus women and exploited males in a class based society, became interwoven with each other. In all the class based societies, such as: Slavery, Feudalism or Capitalism, males and women in general has been in same way being exploited.

In the civilized era of human civilization monogamy was introduced. "The Monogamous Family...its final victory being one of the signs of the beginning of civilization...It is based on the supremacy of man. It was not in any way the fruit of individual sex love with which it had absolutely nothing in common, for the marriages remained marriages of convenience, as before...Thus monogamy does not by any means makes its appearance in history as the reconciliation of man and woman, still less as the highest form of such reconciliation. On the contrary, it appears as the subjection of one sex by the other, as the proclamation of a conflict between sexes entirely unknown hitherto in prehistoric times" (Stalin 1943).

Engels showed that with the introduction of class antagonism and class exploitation, conflict between man and women also began and exploitation of women by men became part of the whole system. Thus, with the emergence of class society and class exploitation, subjugation of women community and exploitation on them has historically been related with each other very intimately. In view of this, according to Marxian theory and analysis, without the ending of class exploitation in society, total emancipation of women community is not possible at all. In class based Capitalist society of today, in no way it is possible to stop exploitation of women. In socialist society, class exploitation is basically abolished and as such, if socialism could be established, only than full

emancipation of women will be possible. And right at this point, the question of women's liberation is interwoven with the emancipation of the exploited masses.

Conclusion:

Development of different theories on family in Capitalist society from feminist perspectives, developed mainly in the late 1960s and 1970s, when several feminist writers employed Marxian concepts in their criticism of the family. From this perspective, the family is seen as a unit which produces one of the basic commodities of capitalism, labor. Family in capitalism, according to this perspective, produces cheap labor from the point of view of the capitalists since they do not have to pay for the production of children or their upkeep. In particular the wife is not paid for producing and rearing children. Margaret Benston states that "the amount of unpaid labor performed by women is very large and very profitable to those who own the means of production To pay women for their work, even at minimum wage scales, would involve a massive redistribution of wealth. At present, the support of the family is hidden tax on the wage earner -his wage buys the labor power of two people." The fact that husband must pay for the production and upkeep of future labor acts as a strong discipline on his behavior at work. He cannot easily withdraw his labor with a wife and children to support. These responsibilities weaken his bargaining power and commit him to wage labor. Benston argues that, "As an economic unit, the nuclear family is a valuable stabilizing force in capitalist society. Since the production which is done in home is paid for by the husband-father's earnings, his ability to withhold labor from the market is much reduced."

Not only does the family produce and rear cheap labor, it also maintains it in a good order at no cost of the employer. In her role as a housewife, the woman attends to her husband needs thus keeping him in good running order to perform his role as wage laborer. Fran Ansley translates Parson's view, that the family functions to stabilize adult personalities, into a Marxian framework, ' She sees the emotional support provided by the wife as a safety valve from the frustration produced in the husband by working in a Capitalist system. Rather than being turned against the system which produced it, the frustration is absorbed by the comforting wife. In this way the system is not threatened. In Ansley's words " When wife play their traditional role as takers of shit, the often absorb their husband's legitimate and frustration at their own powerlessness and oppression. With every worker provided with a sponge to soak up his possible revolutionary ire, the bosses rest more secure " (quoted in Bernard 1976) Kathy McAfee and Myrna wood make a similar point in their discussion of male dominance in the family. They claim that " The petty dictatorship which most men exercise over their wives and families enables them to vent their anger and frustration in a way which pose no challenge to the system " (qutoed in Rowbotham, 1973).

All women and men have the inalienable right to discover who they are, the right to choose and to self realization, to be powerful, active and positive, getting rid

of the roles culturally imposed and mystery. Women should be given back the virtues which they have been historically denied moral and physical strength, intellect and knowledge and sexual autonomy.

In short we may conclude that Marxist feminism is a sub-type of feminist theory which focuses on the dismantling of capitalism as a way to liberate women. Marxist feminism states that capitalism, which gives rise to economic inequality, dependence, political confusion and ultimately unhealthy social relations between men and women, is the root of women's oppression. According to Marxist theory, in capitalist societies the individual is shaped by class relations; that is, people's capacities, needs and interests are seen to be determined by the mode of production that characterizes the society they inhabit. Marxist feminists see gender inequality as determined ultimately by the capitalist mode of production. Gender oppression is class oppression and women's subordination is seen as a form of class oppression which is maintained (like racism) because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class. Marxist feminists have extended traditional Marxist analysis by looking at domestic labor as well as wage work in order to support their position.

Reference:

- Bunch Charlotte. "Not for Lesbian Only." In *Passionate Politics Feminist Theory in Action*. New York: St. Martins. 1987
- Bernard J: *The future of Marriage*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth . USA. 1976
- K. Wendy & B. Frances "Feminist theory: A Reader. Mayfield Publishing Company. Mountain View, California. USA 1999.
- Marx: *Preface to the contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Progress Publisher Moscow, 1965
- Martin, M.K. and Barbara Voorhies: *Female of the Species* New York. Columbia University Press 1975
- Neubeck Kenneth J & Glasberg Davita Silfen: *Sociology a Critical Approach* McGraw Hill, Inc. New York, USA. 1996
- Rowbotham, S.: *Woman's consciousness .Man's world*, Penguin Books . Harmondsworth USA. 1973.
- F. Engels: *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*: Progress Publishers, Moscow 1967.