

The evolution of feminism sociology essay



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Adaptation is the survival mechanism of civilizations in the course of evolution. It is the emergence of a trait that will enhance species viability in an existing or new environment. Conversely, byproduct is the unintentional consequence of adaptation. Humans due to their great capacity for ‘generalized learning’ have consequently achieved a distinct capability of constructing and imparting culture (Parsons, 1964). According to Biologist Alfred Emerson (1956) within the realm of adaptation the ‘gene’ has now been replaced by the ‘symbol’. Thus it is not just the genetic constitution of human beings that affects the process of evolution but also their cultural practice. Societies subsist within complex social environments (e. g. raw materials, reserves and constraints and limitations) and they adapt to such intricacies. It is thus inevitable that societies reorganize and reform themselves over time in the face of social change. The study of society and social change has taught us that the social order of civilizations changes over time and reorganizes itself to appear as something different from its ancestral form. As a society, we have organized our everyday lives around former and existing situations. We are accustomed to standard and regular conditions and may be sensitive to extremes that fall outside of this array. The stages of evolution as discussed by Morgan (1877) and Tylor (1871, 1881) are as such: savagery, barbarianism and civilization. According to them every society and culture has or will go through these stages of evolution in this order. French philosopher Auguste Comte (1876) advanced the “law of three stages”. According to this human societies progress from a theological stage, which is governed by religion, through a metaphysical stage, in which theoretical speculative assessment is most important, and onward toward a positivist stage, in which empirically based systematic

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scientific ideas are most dominant. It has been argued that society has evolved by way of small steps that have led to increased complexity of society. Herbert Spencer (1887), a British sociologist argued that societies themselves are life forms. He attempted to extend Darwin's tenet of the survival of the fittest to human civilizations and said that society has been steadily moving ahead towards an enhanced state. He claimed that western societies had persisted and evolved because they were better at becoming accustomed to the challenges of life. Emile Durkheim (1933) singled out the basis of societal evolution as a society's increasing development of more complex social interactions. Durkheim viewed societies as changing in the direction of immense demarcation, integration and oppression under the demands of increasing moral density. Durkheim supported that societies have evolved from a comparatively self-sufficient state with little incorporation, where intimidation and domination is required on a social structure, with a kind of cohesion called mechanical solidarity to a more distinguished social structure with maximum division of labor where specialization and collaboration is extensive and interdependence and assimilation give rise to an organic solidarity. Julian Stewart (1955) constructed the multi-linear theory of evolution where he stated that societies change due to their adaptation to changing environments. A more recent view by Bloomfield (1993) suggests that society is in a state of equilibrium and when change takes place a transition results in a consequent stable but more complex society. The human race has shown a tremendous potential for adjustment and change. We have seen many forms of social change over the years. Human civilization has been witness to some foremost structures of transformations such as Industrialization,

Globalization, World War II, Civil Rights Movement in United States, Indian Independence Movement, Gay Liberation Movement and Women's Rights Movement among many more. In this paper we shall reflect briefly upon the evolutionary perspective of the Women's Rights Movement and put forward certain questions as is the Movement a form of adaptation of the society? Or it is the byproduct of adaptation?

' Nothing can be more absurd than the practice that prevails in our country of men and women not following the same pursuits with all their strengths and with one mind, for thus, the state instead of being whole is reduced to half.' (Plato, 428-347 B. C.; Saxonhouse, 1976). In The Republic Plato proposes that an ' ideal' state is one in which women are given the same opportunities as men in areas such as education and participation in activities of the state (Saxonhouse, 1976). He is considered to be the first feminist although his concern is not about the rights of women but about their usefulness (Craik, 1990). Feminism aims towards social change by focusing our attention upon the issues of women and how we can go about empowering women and improving their quality of life. Feminism can be seen to have a transformational function to society. Competing for resources is the basis for evolutionary theory. This notion that has enabled our species to survive has an important implication in feminist theory. The feminist movement has consequently emerged in a patriarchal society as an amendment in the course of evolution. In Evelyn Reed's book ' Women's Evolution: from Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Families' (1975) she mentions that social structures were initially based on mother-child relationship and were considered matrilineal clans long before the patriarchal family tradition

began. Men were not part of the child birth process and were prohibited from eating women's food. She also notes that in most areas the essentially reliable sources of food were that of the gatherers (vegetables) and not hunters (animals). It was later that these matrilineal clans transformed into a patriarchal society. ' In the broadest sense, evolution is merely change, and so is all-pervasive; galaxies, languages, and political systems all evolve' (Futuyma, 1986). Accordingly evolution can be presumed as a process of the development of a characteristic of society from its primitive state to its present or specialized state. Change comes about through the competition of resources and the circulation of favorable innovations in thought and action. Human nature is habituated by communication, which establishes what resources are available (Cooley, 1897). Arnold Toynbee (1987) postulated that civilizations transform from a stationary state to an active one. A more recent perspective on change was hypothesized by Thomas Kuhn (1996) where he talks of the concept of a paradigm. A paradigm is a set of values and beliefs about reality that allows a people to form theories about reality and solve problems. The central feature of a paradigm is its own etiquettes and principles. A paradigm remains popular and influential as long as it justifies most observable phenomenon and resolves most problems but it yields as new paradigms rise and begin to challenge it. Thus, long phases of " normal" science are pursued by short periods of " revolutions" that entail essential changes in prime theoretical presumptions. A good example here would be the androcentric assumptions that hard as well as social sciences tend to have embedded in their core and the recent shift towards a feminist paradigm where such assumptions are being questioned and alternate ideologies are being presented. This general idea is reinforced by Fritjof

Capra (1997), who maintains that ' a single person can have a worldview, but a paradigm is shared by a community.' The paradigm impression demonstrates the scope of social change as a turning point on the state of mind of individuals. History confirms that changes in society occur not because of great wars or authoritarian governments but because a significant amount of people started to change their mind, even if only a little (Harman, 1998). Contrary to the impression that innovative ideas are the efforts of a handful of elites like scientists, philosophers, artists and religious leaders, sometimes new ways of perceiving life in a significantly meaningful way progresses from ' the great mass of the population' (Yankelovich, 1982).

Another model of social change helps to explain the transformation of feminist societies was presented by Anthony Wallace in 1970 in his book *Culture and Personality*. Change is seen to present itself when intense individual strain leads to a shift away from cultural harmony. Initial response of society as well as the individual is that it is a distinct personal problem, but as these individual problems begin to come together in the form of a group, they result in unstable social foundations and society in turn has to recognize it as a problem on a larger scale. Once this happens it is essential for society to endure a process of recovery and transformation to return to the state of balance. This process of renewal depends upon characteristics such as formulation of a code, communication, organization, adaptation, cultural transformation and routinization. We attempt to integrate the evolution of feminism into this model. Feminism has formulated a code in the sense that it has a ' goal society' in mind. It is one that contrasts the

patriarchal society and insists upon a tradition of equality among sexes and envisions a liberated future for women. Communication in the feminist tradition has been one of prime significance. Consciousness raising groups were established by New York Radical Women and Women's Liberation groups. These meetings enabled women to share their stories and shed light on how their personal problems were in fact more common than recognized (Sarachild, 1973). Women's organizations exist in most countries that have been set up to address the issues of women and work towards globalized incorporation of solutions. The evolution of feminism has required the inclusion of many new viewpoints and the adaptation of older ones. For example the radical feminist notion that 'women are superior to men' has now been substituted for a more holistic idea where women and men are considered as equal and no one sex is better than the other. The Women's suffragettes have been able to attain women's voting in most parts of the world and this has led to a cultural transformation to the perception of women and their basic rights and privileges. The war on patriarchy is still ongoing but the movement has won many battles amongst. The vision of an egalitarian state is still very much alive. Routinization for many element of the movement are yet to happen as 'goal future' is far from within our grasp.

History illustrates that women have suffered many dreadful fates at the hands of persons, in the form of rape, female infanticide, sati ritual, honor killing, bride burning, female genital mutilation, sex slaves, etc. Data shows that between sixty to more than one hundred million women and girls are considered 'missing' from numerous populations and are likely to have

survived if gender discriminatory practices like sex-selective abortions, infanticide and inadequate care based on gender were absent (Seager, 2003; Sen, 1990; Klasen and Wink, 2002). Studies show that one in every five women have been forced to have sex, beaten or otherwise abused in their lifetimes and the perpetrator is usually a member of the family or an otherwise known person (Heise, Ellsberg, Gottemoeller, 1999) and about 69% of female homicide victims are killed by their male partners (Krug, et al., WHO, 2002). Available data implies that in some countries nearly one in four women confirm sexual violence by an intimate partner and equal to one-third of adolescent girls report that they were forced into sexual acts for the first time (Ellsberg, et al., 2000; Mooney, 1993; Hakimi, et al., 2001; Matasha, et al., 1998; Buga, et. al., 1996). Sexual cruelty is more evident in places where attitudes of male sexual rights and entitlement are intense, where gender roles are inflexible, and in countries where there is an occurrence of other types of violence (Bennett, Manderson, Astbury, 2000; Gartner, 1990; Smutt, Miranda, 1998) In the 1994 genocide in Rwanda it was reported that between 250, 000 and 500, 000 women, or about 20% of women, were raped (De Brouwer, 2005). In 1992, during the five months of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, about 20, 000 - 50, 000 women were raped (Ashford, Huet-Vaughn, 1997). In India, deaths attributable to dowry are estimated to be 15, 000 per year and typically they are kitchen fires made to look like an accident (Jethmalani, 1995). Close to half of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS are women. Social elements that lead to female exposure to HIV-1 include poverty, presence of gender inequality, cultural and sexual customs, violence and lack of education (Quinn, Overbaugh, 2005). Between twenty to seventy percent of women opened up about their

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abuse for the first time when they were interviewed for a survey by WHO and have not told anyone before that (WHO, Geneva, 2002). Recent studies have shown that there is no significant rise in the reported rape cases since 1990 (Wolitzky-Taylor, et. al., 2011). Keeping in mind these statistics it is no surprise that the feminist movement has emerged as a medium of social action against the oppression of women. Such atrocities against women are not a recent problem. What is remarkable is that such matters are finally receiving international attention due to the political power that women have acquired that we are now able to place the issue of accountability for gender-based cruelty on the international agenda. Women are taking advantage of opportunities, allocating resources, reconstructing social realities, envisioning a better, holistic and an overall more agreeable future and energizing a new generation of supporters (both female and male). Dissatisfaction among women is a reflection of evolutionary changes within the movement that aims for an integrated society.

As is with all social movements, the women's rights movement too has gone through many changes and reorganizations in its evolution due to climate changes, internal and external conflicts, changes in social values and philosophical progress. The records of the history of feminism are mentioned briefly and represented as an overall picture of the struggle. Many attempts were made to highlight the inequalities between the genders such as the work of 15th century writer Christine De Pizan, who was the first woman to write about the relationship of the sexes (Brown-Grant, 1999), 17th century writer, Margaret Cavendish, 18th century writer, Mary Wollstonecraft, who is often said to be the first feminist philosopher and the works of Jane Austen,

that focused on the restricted lives of women of the former part of the century (McCarthy, 1994). Although efforts were made by women such as Caroline Norton, who helped in changing the situation of married women and child custody in England ((Yalom, 2002; Perkins, 1989) and Florence Nightingale, whose belief was that women had all the aptitude of men but they had none of the opportunities (Bostridge, 2008), 1848 was the year that marked the beginning of an organized Women's Rights Movement. The first wave of feminism was between the 19th to the early 20th century. Here attention was given to issues such as women's education, better working standards, right to vote and running for office. Women's suffrage was extremely significant to the women's rights movement as it eliminated the overtone of them as being second-class citizens (Cott, 1989). What came after is commonly known as second wave feminism and lasted for the duration of 1960s to 1980s. During this time issues such as gender inequalities and discriminations were brought into awareness (Freedman, 2003). The third wave of feminism commenced in the 1990s and emerged to resolve the criticism that second wave feminism received. It dealt with issues of queer politics, reproductive rights, inclusion of race related subjectivities of minority communities (Henry, 2004). It also addressed concerns for a global feminism where matters such as First World vs. Third World feminism, the intersectionality of gender repression and inter-subjugation based on gender, race, sexual preferences (homosexuality), class, nationality, etc., defining feminism, birth and population control, identifying the central aspects of feminism against the political aspects, the gap between researchers and the grass roots, female genital mutilation and the degree and extent of political concerns affecting women have received attention.

Women's Rights movement, as all social movements, evolved and adapted (and still is) to societal changes.