

Feminism, Prejudicial Thinking and Social Justice



Virginia Woolf *Simone de Beauvoir* *Gloria J Watkins* *Cordelia Fine* *Diane Elson*

Modern feminism starts with Virginia Woolf, who explained the role of personal space and financial independence in developing critical thinking, enabling women to make meaningful contributions to society. Simone de Beauvoir elaborates on how a woman's identity is socially constructed under patriarchy, which degrades an individual's identity into a gender-based group identity, leading to all forms of group-based conflicts. Gloria Jean Watkins, also known as *bell hooks*, expands this discussion to include Black women who suffer from double oppression. She argues that it is not simply a binary issue of "man" versus "woman," but a broader issue of (i) people holding prejudices against marginalized communities, whether based on race, gender, religion, caste, or any other group identity (ii) market with uncontrolled capitalism and consumerism policies which transform majority of people into a commodity especially who are marginalized.

Cordelia Fine, a renowned author, psychology expert debunks myths about brain structure differences between men and women and their impact on professional success. She critiques the foundational assumptions of studies that claim to prove women's inferiority, arguing that these differences majorly stem from societal structures, not from biology.

Nancy Folbre and Diane Elson, two feminist economists, emphasize fair compensation for unpaid or low-paid "care" work historically done by women and challenge the traditional economic model, which values risk reduction over care and benefits only a small percentage of people who provide products and services that maintain infrastructure by reducing "risk." While valuing "risk reduction" may be effective for developing nations with weak infrastructure, it can increase inequality in developed nations. Nancy Folbre advocates for economic policies that recognize and redistribute unpaid labor, emphasizing the need for better social policies such as paid family leave and care provisions, which work well in developed nations due to strong infrastructure. Diane Elson uses the "capabilities approach" developed by Amartya Sen to expand women's choices and opportunities in developing nations where infrastructure is weak.

Feminism and social justice should be approached differently in developed and developing parts of the world.

Modern feminism starts with **Virginia Woolf** (1882–1941). Her first challenge was to convince society of the existence of the oppression women face and its negative consequences on society. Writing things directly, like a political speech, wouldn't have been very impactful because such speeches often lack depth, nuance, and connection with the reader. She developed a method called "stream of consciousness," delving into the minds of characters to create a deeper connection with the reader. In her renowned novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf delves into the hollow lives of upper-middle-class British women in the post-Victorian era, highlighting their detachment from the struggles of ordinary people, such as Septimus, a World War I veteran grappling with PTSD. This obliviousness stems largely from their obsessive pursuit of stability, which ultimately erodes their sense of individual identity. In another novel, *Orlando*, Woolf creates a character named Orlando, who comes from an aristocratic, wealthy family and lives for over 300 years. Orlando undergoes a transformation from a man into a beautiful woman and experiences firsthand the social constraints she had never considered when living as a male. In her most famous extended essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf imagines a visit to Oxbridge, a fictional, elite, male-dominated institution where women must rely on men to access the library. She also introduces a fictional sister of Shakespeare, Judith, who, despite possessing equal talent, is denied access to higher education due to societal constraints. Woolf argues that for a woman to write free of patriarchal bias, she must have both financial independence and a room of her own.

The first step in solving any problem is acknowledging its existence, which cannot be done if we do not express or write about our problems without bias.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), french existential philosopher and author of *Second Sex*, introduced the concept of the Other, where men are considered the default or the "Subject" and women are defined in relation to men, as the "Other". She argues that woman's identity is socially constructed due to patriarchy. There are many negative consequences of the socially constructed identity of women, not only to her but to society as a whole, including men. (i) She will constantly seek validation from society and form superficial relationships. (ii) Due to systemic exclusion from financial and educational opportunities, she will chase men with higher social and financial status for survival, but sometimes to the extent of *gold-digging behavior in current terms*, which ultimately steals her individual identity and autonomy. (iii) Due to the internalization of oppression, she will resist her own liberation, whether financial, intellectual, or emotional, and prioritize society and traditions, sometimes even to the extent of supporting social evils. (iv) Her children will suffer from lower self-esteem as they learn to tie their identity and self-worth to society. (v) She won't be able to support a man who is also suffering from patriarchal norms; instead, she will become an emotional burden, resulting in various mental health issues in men, sometimes to the point of suicide.

It is not enough for men to free women; they must also free themselves from the tyranny of masculinity.

She critiques the over glorification of motherhood, how the role of mother is often idealized, yet the responsibilities of raising children remain undervalued. She also criticizes religion, particularly Christianity, for portraying women in extreme stereotypes either as saintly goddesses or as evil figures while neglecting to acknowledge the full complexity and individuality of women.

Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021), also known as **bell hooks**, was a renowned American author, feminist theorist, cultural critic, and social activist. She expanded the discussion of oppression to include Black women, who suffer from double oppression. In her books *Ain't I a Woman* and *Feminist Theory*, she criticized mainstream feminism, led by middle-aged white women, for not valuing Black women as equally as their white counterparts. This reinforced their primary identity as white, defined by the white male-dominated society, rather than their identity as women. She also criticized the Black men's struggle, where, in the quest for racial equality, they replicated the same sexism found in the mainstream white male-dominated society. Both movements, she argued, are incapable of understanding the problems faced by Black women. Due to the lack of unity at the level of identity, both feminism and the Black struggle, dominated by men, are failing to counter white male-dominated societal norms effectively.

The goal of feminist thinking is not to raise women to the level of men but to transform the structures of domination.

In her book *All About Love*, she explains love as a method for healing from generational trauma, whether it is based on gender, race, class, religion, caste, or any other form of oppression.

(i) Embracing vulnerability, understanding roots, and forgiveness:

If we don't acknowledge vulnerability as a part of life, we won't be able to create safe spaces where people can express themselves, which is essential for economic, political, and social progress. Without embracing vulnerability, it becomes difficult to revisit our roots and scrutinize history, as doing so often brings up the trauma caused by the popular narratives propagated by oppressors. These popular narratives are frequently not grounded in reality but are polarized political narratives presented without proper context. Understanding the context of oppression helps us to forgive, heal, and develop strategies to ensure such oppression doesn't recur for anyone in the future. If we consider the popular narrative of *men as oppressors and women as the oppressed*, it may lead many women to shy away from exploring their roots and history to avoid the potential unpleasantness of stories centered on oppression. It is possible that these oversimplified, binary, sometimes fake, and politically motivated narratives presented by mainstream media and textbooks give women a narrow understanding of this issue and potentially transform them into being *anti-men* out of fear and ignorance.

(ii) Building communities and safe spaces where people can express their opinions without fear of judgment, because the first step is not sufficient to bring change.

Free speech is the most essential part of social justice. It is not sufficient to protect free speech against censorship from the government but also from unspoken censorship, known as "*political correctness*". The extreme right wing often enforces political correctness to the point where any deviation from the norm is suppressed, while the extreme left wing can become so focused on signaling virtue that it loses sight of the core issue, drifting into illogicality. Political extremism often overlooks the nuances and deeper understanding of issues. She advocates for "*radical openness*," which involves creating spaces where people can have honest, and sometimes uncomfortable, conversations about race, gender, and class.

Redefining the Feminism Issue with *bell hooks*

She argues that feminism is not simply a "man" versus "woman," but a broader issue of: (i) people holding prejudices against marginalized communities, whether based on race, gender, religion, caste, or any other group identity, and (ii) a market driven by uncontrolled capitalism and consumerism, which transforms the majority of people, especially those who are marginalized, into commodities.

In early human history, prejudice helped conserve energy and protect against threats in a resource-scarce environment, where food, shelter, and safety were limited. People needed to quickly assess who could be trusted within their group and who might pose a threat, often based on visible differences. Today, with abundant resources like food, healthcare, and technology, along with improved systems of distribution and cooperation, these biases are no longer necessary and instead hinder collaboration, social harmony, and progress.

Cordelia Fine, a renowned author of books like *Delusion of Genders* and *Testosterone Rex*, psychology expert debunks myths about brain structure differences between men and women and their impact on professional success. She critiques the foundational assumptions of studies that claim to prove women's inferiority, arguing that these differences majorly stem from culture and societal structures, not from biology.

Research on young children (and even animals like monkeys) shows that boys prefer object play and girls prefer social play, but it doesn't take into account neuroplasticity, as the developing brain is highly malleable. Both boys and girls show interest in colorful and novel objects. Girls' brains develop the left hemisphere faster, which is responsible for the faster development of language skills. These differences in preferences are not particularly significant during the first two years, but they become culturally and socially exaggerated after that.

Due to an interest in objects, young boys start playing with blocks and building sets, which strengthen their neural pathways and improve their spatial reasoning. Due to the faster development of language skills, girls become more interested in social play, like playing with other children using dolls. People often link high income with higher math skills; however, there are some fundamental problems with this oversimplified assumption that "math" is simply a spatial reasoning task. If we consider multiplication and division, it is essentially abstraction more than spatial reasoning. When we say, "assume 500 fruits are divided among 100 children," does the child imagine 500 fruits and 100 children to come up with the answer of 5 fruits per child? Absolutely not.

Nancy Folbre and Diane Elson, two feminist economists, emphasize fair compensation for unpaid or low-paid "care" work historically done by women and challenge the traditional economic model, which values risk reduction over care and benefits only a small percentage of people who provide products and services that maintain infrastructure by reducing "risk." While valuing "risk reduction" may be effective for developing nations with weak infrastructure, it can increase inequality in developed nations. Nancy Folbre advocates for economic policies that recognize and redistribute unpaid labor, emphasizing the need for better social policies such as paid family leave and care provisions, which work well in developed nations due to strong infrastructure. Diane Elson uses the "capabilities approach" developed by Amartya Sen to expand women's choices and opportunities in developing nations where infrastructure is weak. Feminism and social justice should be approached differently in developed and developing parts of the world.

Problems with Feminism in India

(i) Indian feminists mostly belong to urban areas and aren't very aware of rural India. There is a significant cultural difference between the life of a poor person in urban areas and its nearby districts and the life of a poor person in rural areas, far from urban centers. They often extrapolate the concept of a poor person in the "urban" context to a poor person in the "rural" context without realizing that there exists free/cheaper access to healthcare, education and public transport infrastructure in urban areas, provided by the government, as well as the privilege of a lack of extreme levels of discriminatory practices against marginalized communities, at least at a baseline level, by natives of urban areas based on religion, caste, class, etc.

(ii) Indian feminists are advocating for a distorted version of Nancy Folbre's approach—despite her advising against its use in developing nations like India due to its inadequate consideration of poverty—rather than adopting Diane Elson's approach, which is rooted in Amartya Sen's capability framework, for women's economic empowerment.