



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Uncharted Terrains: Feminism to Postfeminism

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.64](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.64)



Article information

Article Received:23/06/2025
Article Accepted:27/07/2025
Published online:01/08/2025

Abstract

The world of theory is not a static process. It is ever evolving. Feminism has dominated the literary world for several decades. The paper seeks to study how the once pervasive feminist theory has unfolded the realm of new insights. Postfeminist ideology suits the contemporary situation since it is more vocal and open in advocating the issues of women. The paper highlights the need to adapt to the exigencies of the fast-changing world by embracing the all-new ideology of postfeminism. An attempt has been made to trace the distinct phases of feminist movement and their repercussions. It also brings to the fore how postfeminism has made its presence by broadening its oeuvre and scaling the narrow walls of feminism. The paper elucidates the role of media and popular culture in disseminating the ideals of postfeminism which has further led to the widespread popularity of this new vision.

Key words: Feminism, Postfeminism, Media.

Introduction

Gender issues have been the subject of debate since ages. The struggle of women for self-discovery, self-reliance and self-sufficiency was clearly visible in the feminist ideology that reigned supreme for a long time. According to an old adage, old order changeth yielding place to new, which means that change is the law of nature. There was a strong need to change the age-old gender practices which made stereotyping a way of life. Women's issues have been approached from different perspectives from time to time which led to the development of the feminist theory.

Feminism as a movement for political, cultural, social and economic emancipation of women has traversed distinctly three phases which are known as three waves of feminist movement. The first wave was a political movement and its noted proponents strived for the rights of suffrage for women. Mary Wollstonecraft, the noted feminist of the first wave, has been the harbinger of new insights which strengthened women to question the practices of subjugation and oppression.

Second wave feminist critics highlight that women are oppressed not only from outside by institutional, political, societal and cultural directives and norms, but more insidiously they are also victims of their personal beliefs and convictions, caught in "the prison of their own minds" (Friedan 265). It was Betty Friedan who questioned the patriarchal set up and gender stereotyping in terms of the limitations imposed on women. Her contributions in the world of feminist theory paved the way for a new era of freedom for women.

As the time marched ahead, change could be witnessed in terms of plethora of perspectives emerging from various corners of the world. Women started raising their voice against their subjugation and victimization. The words of Simone De Beauvoir hold relevance in the context of defining the image of the new woman, "woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her *possibilities* should be defined" (66). History of feminism is a testimony to the fact that feminist movements and theories have campaigned for women's legal rights, reproductive rights, work place rights, protection of women from domestic violence etc.

Third wave of feminism started in the 1990s and its exponents questioned the paradigms of second wave feminism. The Third wave created ripples in the world by challenging the stereotypical gender definitions given by the feminists of the second wave. The Third wave of feminism joined hands with media in proclaiming that feminism is dead and it is time to move beyond the existing notions of feminism. An increasing number of writers began to portray women with strong will and die-hard determination.

It is true that the world of theory is ever evolving. The coming of a new perspective, 'postfeminism', heralded the era of change by stepping out of the narrow confines of feminism. However, postfeminism did not signal the death of feminism. Postfeminism gave new dimensions to feminism by creating new spaces, unfolding new opportunities and strengthening women.

The roots of postfeminism could be seen in the 1980s when women in their twenties were labeled as 'Postfeminist Generation.' It was Susan Bolotin who introduced the term for the first time in 1982 in the New York Times Magazine's cover story "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation". According to Misha Kavka, "The term 'postfeminism' was originally coined in 1985 by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* to advocate a feminism that would break down the divide between equality based or "liberal" feminism and difference based or "radical feminism" (29). There are many connotations attached to the prefix 'post' in postfeminism. The 'post' in postfeminism refers to 'after in time or order'. It also refers to the past of feminism. However, it is difficult to limit the term to one single meaning.

Postfeminism marks a genesis of a new vision which is more flexible and open. It extends the scope of feminism by incorporating what is left untouched by the precursors of feminism. In 1919, a group of Greenwich Village Literati started a journal *Judy* and stated: "we're interested in people now – not in men and women", that "moral, social, economic, and political standards should not have anything to do with sex," that it would be 'pro-woman without being anti-man,' "and that "their stance [is called] 'post-feminist'" (Cott 282).

The journey from feminism to postfeminism has gone through numerous roadblocks which have actually proved to be stepping stones. The world has entered a new era which embarks upon various conspicuous issues which could not be dealt within the purview of feminism. Postfeminism with its widened scope encompasses gender equality, the issues of men, girl power, queer theory, social justice etc. The female protagonists of the postfeminist texts represent an epoch of freedom where they have freedom to shop, make choices, and marry or not to marry etc. Increase in social awareness, equal education and independent careers have put an end to the era of victimization. The postfeminist writers explore the issues of males where they are the victims and taken for granted. While not denying the realities of male privileges, men's studies bring to light an unseen reality that men like women are

essentially human, and love being the universal need is felt by them with as equal intensity as by women.

Popular culture plays an invigorating role in shaping the mindset of women. Popular texts, music, television and media have a strong impact on women and in influencing their thoughts and opinions. There is a strong linkage of postfeminism within popular culture which points out towards the saturation point of the feminist approach. Angela McRobbie in her latest book, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), claims that the appearance of post-feminism in contemporary popular culture contributes to the undoing of (academic) feminism because postfeminism suggests that feminism is no longer necessary as equality has already been achieved. In her view, academic feminism in the media is now presented as if it was “out of fashion” (16).

The growing media culture has given a boost to postfeminism. Even the advertisers are foraying into a new world where they present a new image of a liberated woman who glorifies her beauty e.g. the advertisement of L’Oreal where we see Aishwarya Rai Bachan saying, “I am worth it.” The issues of equality at workplace and the reproductive rights of a woman are highlighted by media. The women of the postfeminist era have the capability and finesse to manage their own affairs. They are independent and do not depend on others for taking personal and professional decisions. They continue their ongoing quest of equality and deal with their working environment with panache.

Postfeminists strive for an attractive female body. Age is no barrier for idealizing beauty. Cosmetic surgeries have become a routine affair of women to look attractive. Magazines are presenting a changed visage of women of the postfeminist times in terms of their freedom of choice. Postfeminists are considered to be sexual activists who use their body as an instrument to achieve empowerment.

Postfeminism also refers to a new feminism synonymous with girl power. The phrase ‘girl power’ came into limelight in 1996 when the spice girls on the pop stage spoke for female assertiveness and autonomy to give freedom to the suppressed and powerless. The lyrics of their songs echo the struggle for freedom and inspire women to give a direction to their aspirations. Postfeminism incorporates into its orbit the slogans of ‘girl power’. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon in their book *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2006) describe Girl Power as “a complex and contradictory discourse that provides a new articulation of young femininity and represents a feminist ideal of a new, robust, young woman with agency and strong sense of self” (76). Madonna, a popular face of music industry, has been instrumental in articulating what it means to be a girl in today’s world. She openly declares a new space for the women in her songs who have been labeled as victims for a long time. The music resonates the hidden desires of women to lead their lives as per their own impulses, make choices and gain empowerment.

Postfeminism has not gone unchallenged as it is clear from Susan Faludi’s influential critique of postfeminism in *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (1991). She portrays postfeminism as a devastating reaction against second wave feminism. Feminism is unfashionable, passé and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. She writes, “We’re ‘post-feminist’ now, they assert, meaning, not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care” (95). She argues that a backlash against second wave feminism in the 1980s has successfully re-defined feminism through its terms. She holds media responsible for creating a backlash against feminism. Faludi’s assertion is that media causes harm to women by creating an unnecessary pressure on them.

It is clear that postfeminism has also met the disdain of critics which points towards the ever-growing speculations and explorations. When intensively reflective readers refuse to accept the residue of earlier accepted criticisms, newer approaches are bound to come up. Though the newer critical approaches may appear unsettling in the beginning, soon they transform into full-fledged schools of thought.

It can be logically concluded that postfeminism is the re-evaluation of the canons of feminism and seeks to resolve the issues raised by feminism. It revises the root feminist theory, adding new dimensions, and hence growing into a mature body of literary theory. It is, in fact, is a multifaceted concept which represents a change in women's attitudes and preferences. It takes into its ambit what was left untouched by the feminist movement. It does not declare the death of feminism rather extends its scope for further retrospection. It presents an entirely renewed ideology of varied hues by presenting the image of a new woman who is shunning the old feminist path by exhibiting her liberal outlook towards life. She is no longer seen as an object of sexual gratification; she is offered a due place to decide what she wants in her life. She has cast aspersions to the old stereotypical roles and has started the quest of self-fulfillment. Media too has been instrumental in changing the mindset of the orthodox people who offered suffocated roles to women to exist in the world around them. Thus, postfeminism accommodates diversity and change

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