

Utopian Feminism in the Background of Revolutionary Europe



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ABSTRACT: While sociology as a discipline prides in explaining the intricacies of gender and how the various gender roles play out in our society, it is ultimately the chronology and course of history that platters the ideas and events as they ought to have taken place, to fuel the food for thought in other disciplines. Role of women or studies on women have always assumed some special importance in the light of the inherent patriarchy to which womenfolk often found themselves to be subordinated, excluded from the public life and academics, writing. Notwithstanding, the force and tide of time did lead to many upheavals in Europe in the early 19th Century and significance of women although not actively but passively grew up to take a very prominent place in modern History. This paper focuses chiefly on women and their movements in early 19th Century – the coinage of the term Utopian feminism and how revolutionary times call for unprecedented changes both in society and gender role orders.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Utopia, Gender, Movements, Europe, 19th century, Revolution

SCOPE

The scope of this paper is limited to Europe in the early 19th century, limiting the time frame from 1815 to 1850 and the subsequent developments during this period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Brigitte Remy-Hébert's book *The first women's movement Suffragist struggles in the 19th and early 20th centuries* has given a deep insight into the struggles towards identifying a position in society.
2. UTOPIAN DREAMS IN THE NEW WORLD AND FOR THE NEW WOMAN: THE INFLUENCE OF UTOPIAN SOCIALISM IN FIRST WAVE FEMINISM. THE CASE OF MARIE HOWLAND AND TOPOLOBAMBO'S COMMUNITY. – by Macarena Iribarne discusses at length about ideas of newfound economic independence of women, free love and utopia with some case studies in specific.
3. *The convergence of Feminism and Socialism in Europe in the 1830s'* by Olivia Tolaini is a vibrant discussion of the various socio political upheavals of Europe and how feminist movements shaped out of them.
4. *Gender and Revolution in Europe, 19th to 20th Centuries* by Gabriella Hauch provides some useful insights into how the ideas and the concepts of Revolution had affected the will of women in the contemporary period.

The phenomenon called Women

During the Enlightenment the “Rights of Man” were under discussion in England and in France. Mary Wollstonecraft has been called the Mother of Feminism and the first feminist. 2 She identified with the revolutionaries of 1789. She proposed to apply enlightened ideas to women. To her, women were rational creatures who were no less capable of intellectual achievement than men.¹ Her book “Vindications of the Rights of Women” was a landmark in itself as it gave a clarion call to all women and declared how they were no less, talked about their deprivation of opportunity to join the French Revolution and their exclusion from having an equal footing with the men. While French Revolution had denied the political rights to women, but the new liberal wave soon impacted new civil rights for them. Numerous rights, including the right to a divorce, family property, in addition to the equality of girls and boys in matters of inheritance and instruction were impacted on women. It also imposed on fathers the obligation to pay alimony for their illegitimate children. These rights were gradually challenged after the Revolution.² This throws light on the Post Napoleonic orthodox and conservative turns of the polity and state. This only shows how the subject of women was struggling to

¹ Remy-Hébert, Brigitte , *The first women's movement Suffragist struggles in the 19th and early 20th centuries*

²Gabriella Hauch , « Gender and revolution in Europe, 19th-20th centuries », Encyclopédie pour une histoire numérique de l'Europe [online], ISSN 2677-6588, published on 22/06/20, consulted on 06/03/2021. Permalink : <https://ehne.fr/en/node/12343>

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get some limelight and recognition in the face of growing neglect and subjugation of women. The conceptions of an ideal women being meek and submissive, an apposite fit only in household chores began propagating as a plausible excuse of this domination by males. A politically engaged woman would be neglecting her family, thereby endangering the functioning of the state. Moreover, the erotic power of women would disturb the masculine and rational space of politics.³ With ideas such as these, it is evident how women could not participate in the growing revolutionary stage that had been set up in Europe.

However the state of affairs changed considerably. Ideological tide of liberalism and the cult of protest soon engulfed women into seeking a new definition and a gender role for themselves in the society. One of the first movements which witnessed a serious involvement of women was the Female seminary Movement dated at 1815.⁴The notable leaders like Emma Willard and Catherine E. Beecher started advocating the right of women to get educated and rejected the status of domination. Although they accepted the separate sphere theory around women and wanted separate educational establishments for women, the movement was still important as an immediate cause of the outburst of the upcoming feminist agitations to follow. Seminary movement proved to women that they need to start protesting against the prevailing social order to gain something substantial.

Beyond the designated housewife

Victorian era in English history marked a well laid definition of the gender role for women. With Queen Victoria and her imperial Regina, her devotion to Prince Albert, Her domestic life became the ideal family like that spread over the 19th century. Women were subjected to the notions of serving the family and children only and were discouraged any public life. The example of the Queen made it easy to morally impose an order upon all women and across colonial countries of this subjugated and compromised position of women, ironically being led by a Woman. The separate sphere ideology garnered some importance with women being described physically weak and incompetent for the roles designated for men, and how fertility was God's mission, pain during childbirth assigned by God and how women's duty was to impart moral education to the next generation. Sir William Blackstone's Commentaries, 1756 gives an insight into the compromised status of women - "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything..."⁵ Women were denied the basic human right of a legal entity, subsumed completely by their husbands and chained to the domestic lives.

The biggest revolution after the French upheaval was the Industrial Revolution that had gradually mounted on the shoulders of expanding labour force and ever increasing demand for labour. It was a moment of metamorphosis for the entire nation as the families no longer continued to be production units and no the family members started venturing out to find work in other places. This induced a change in the hierarchy of relations in the society and culminated in disbalancing the existing gender roles of the society. While women ventured out in the face of rising employment opportunities, the new world which was shunned for them now welcomed them. For the period 1787 to 1815, 66 percent of married women in working-class households had either a recorded occupation or positive earnings. For the period 1816-20 the rate fell to 49 percent, but in 1821-40 it recovered to 62 percent.⁶

The increasing involvement of women in bread earning impacted the monopoly enjoyed by men in this area⁷, and hence this came to be perceived as a threat to the men folk in general. The rising gender tension was somewhat similar to the counter agitations post French revolution, and the same happened as laws were tightened and women could no longer take part in agitations or gatherings. However the advent of women in the rising tide of social transformation had many positive benefits for them. Women trade unions and the spirit of sisterhood in factories came into existence. The women's labor unions which were formed worked mostly for better pay and better working conditions. The Female Labor Reform Association in New England, begun in 1844, was one of the nation's most significant.⁸

In the eighteenth century women were apprenticed to a wide variety of trades, including butchery, bookbinding, brush making, carpentry, ropemaking and silversmithing.⁹Widows were often favoured by these guilds on the presumption that they were familiar with the nature of the trade which their late husband's practised. However with the decline in the power of guilds the

³ Hauch, « Gender and revolution in Europe, 19th-20th centuries

⁴ Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 15.

⁵ Blackstone, William, (1756), Commentaries on the Laws of England, Bell, Susan G., 7 and Offen, Karen M., Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, Volume One, 1750-1880, p. 3

⁶ Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, "Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the male-Breadwinner Family, 1790-1865," *Economic History Review* 48 (February 1995): 89-117

⁷ Weil, Kari, (1990), 'Feminocentric Utopia and Male Desire: "The New Paris of the 10 Saint-Simonians"', in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, ed. by Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, p.161

⁸ Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), pg 46 -47

⁹ David Landes, *On the technology of the Industrial Revolution*, The Unbound Prometheus, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969, and Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1990.

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position of women became critical yet again. But the newly gained allowed women to realise that they were no less as compared to their male counterparts in society.

New tides and Women

Industrialisation directly led to the birth of the working classes and this class was the precursor the biggest revolution that the society was to witness very shortly. With oppressions on these classes and a rising tide of social equality different movements started in society –

Chartist Movement which as arguably the first movement of agitation by the working class, shared ideological similarities with Saint Simonians, and the Owenites. All these three contributed to the shaping of utopian feminism. However the Saint Simonians often patronised women, Chartists were themselves threatened¹⁰ with the growing women workforce and limited their demands of suffrage to males only and Owenites were too radical in demanding abolition of families totally to begin the life in communes. However it would be very wrong to say that women did not benefit, as has been argued by David Jones¹¹ that it was remarkable how women had participated in such numbers, although the role of women was passive and in favour of their male family members and bound by their concerns for their families' upliftment. The female authors amongst the Saint-Simonians, once they became an orbital group, were prolific. They established their own journal written by women for women called the *Tribunes des Femmes*.¹² It is precisely the collective influence of the various activities of women during this phase that marks the significance of the term Utopian feminism. The contributors of these writings were particularly degraded in the eyes of the society to the point of being branded as 'unsexed' and many of them denounced their surnames as a mark of protest against the patriarchal social order. It was seen more as a rejection of gender and rather an improvement of gender status. However it was remarkable that the working class women had achieved so much of self esteem and confidence. One rhetoric which is of particular importance in reference to women's participation is that of the role of militant motherhood which is –

Women although continued to be in their domestic spheres carrying out assigned roles, but there was an improvement in their evaluations about themselves and a positive self image developed among them, with greater moralising power and authority, they were no mentally prepared for full scale revolutions and it was all in a very unthreatening way. They understood that it was up to them to speak up against their deprivation as the men will not do that. They had sort of packaged their sexuality into a restrained middle class domesticity. It was a period of little change in status but greater ideological reformations rather. This can also be witnessed in the role women played in the 1848 upheavals which began in Sicily and soon spread through most of Europe. Although women were banned from these too, but we have legends of many women who had cross dressed and took part in the protest marches. The various demands of women in 1848—the right to vote, bear arms, complete university studies, or peacefully frequent a cafe in the evening without male company—demonstrate to what extent they were aware of the inherent contradiction in the bourgeois and liberal conception of liberty and equality.¹³ The stereotypical domestic image of the women was shattered in the light of a new, aggressive revolutionary image that also established a complementarity of genders.

The Marxian Wave

The impact of Marxian ideals and the growing dissatisfaction of capitalist too shredded their own colours to the feminist evolution in such that the rise of class conflict gave a political colour to the agitations. The already ideologically empowered women now inflames with the growing dissatisfaction of the class conflict and waged full scale agitations towards the betterment of their lot as well. One direct impact was the recognition of gender parity with the demand for suffrage by women. The developments in Europe had still not guaranteed or even recognise the right of women to vote and become actively involved in the political affairs of the state. Marxian ideology had been the upholder of the dignity of class as a whole – supporting the right of emancipation which they are entitled to.

The growth of class consciousness particularly manifested in the class action and collective efforts in improving their lot had a profound impact on women as well. Not only was the liberal floodgate of the century an aggravating force towards women gaining the collective spirit to fight, it was the consciousness that fuelled them to stand up in protest too. The biggest contributor in this case would also be the opening up of work avenues for women, that especially empowered them with a taste of public life beyond the household domain.

¹⁰ Rendall, Jane, (1985), *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860*, London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, p.241

¹¹ Jones, David, (1983), 'Women and Chartism', *History*, vol. 68, (222), p.5

¹² Moses, Claire G., 'Saint-Simonian Men/Saint-Simonian Women: The Transformation of Feminist Thought in 1830s France', p. 260

¹³ Hauch, Gabriella, "Women's Spaces in the Men's Revolution of 1848," in Dieter Dowe, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Dieter Langewiesche and Jonathan Sperber, *Europe in 1848. Revolution and Reform* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 639-693

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Family unit

19th Century saw a particular emphasis on the family life that came to be portrayed as fundamental and most important in the life of an individual person. This conception however had an implied overtone for defining and restricting the role of women.

Holcombe shows that although mid-Victorian ideologies about women's place and women's dependent position in the patriarchal family were still being publicized, middle class women were increasingly entering the labour force. The reasons lie in demographic and economic realities, not ideology. The first of these was the surplus of unmarried or 'redundant women', in Harriet Martineau's phrase. These women, to whom the sex ratio denied husbands and for whom male mortality denied fathers and brothers, had to work. Furthermore, the expansion of the tertiary sector in England provided jobs for these women and for working class women who could take advantage of increased educational opportunities. In Holcombe's analysis, the development of feminist ideology about women's work accompanied change and justified it. It did not precede it or cause it in any sense.¹⁴

All theories of society – liberal, republican or conservative – defined the family as the foundation of the community and the cornerstone of the state, principles that served to legitimate women's exclusion from the political sphere and to reinforce their responsibility for everything to do with children and the family. Starting in mid-century, the law massively contributed to lending new legitimating the man's predominance in the couple and this on an international scale. By making marriage into an institution, it even laid the foundations for a system based on sexual hierarchy and a new "bourgeois patriarchy" in civil law.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

While feminist movements were not yet ready in their best form but the early 19th Century Utopian Feminism was the harbinger to the crusades to follow. It was an opportunist spurt in a ripe time, relying on a world that was waging physical and ideological wars on domestic and international fronts. Women were still reeling under subjugation but they had already mobilised an ideological revolution. The already revolutionary Europe had quite impliedly set the stage for feminism to develop. Women realised that their exclusion was not the norm, but rather a hurdle they need to get away with. They sought political, social and economic mainstream roles for themselves and they got the perfect impetus in the later 19th Century world that witnessed transnational women organisations - International Congress of Women's Rights in Paris in 1878 , International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), that were soon to shape the movement in a different empowered path.

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- 4) Moses, Claire G., 'Saint-Simonian Men/Saint-Simonian Women: The Transformation 46 of Feminist Thought in 1830s France'
- 5) Holcombe, Lee, *Victorian Ladies at Work*

¹⁴ Holcombe, Lee, *Victorian Ladies at Work* (Hamden, Conn., 1973), 216.

¹⁵ Gerhard Ute, "Women's Rights in Civil Law in Europe (nineteenth century)", *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 2016/1 (No 43), p. 250-273. DOI: 10.4000/clio.13020. URL: <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-clio-women-gender-history-2016-1-page-250.htm>