



Gloria Steinem- A Feminist Activist with a Difference (A Study of her major views)

English Literature

Key Words: Radical Feminist, reproductive freedom, activist, equality and justice.

Dr. Sunita Nimavat

Assistant Professor of English at N.P.College of Computer & Mgt., Kadi (North Gujarat).

ABSTRACT

Gloria Steinem is one of the most influential radical feminists of our times. Born in the USA, she struggled a lot and emerged as a champion of women's rights. Her focus has been on reproductive freedom of women. She believes that men have subjugated women by controlling their reproductive system. It is a means of expressing patriarchal authority for men. Steinem favours abortion and opposes pornography, genital mutilation and discrimination against transsexuals and same sex marriages. She believes that feminism has come a long way. It has garnered political support creating more favourable environment. Referring to Indian Women, she said that there is a growing awareness about their rights and freedom among Indian women.

Gloria Steinem is one of the most radical and controversial feminists of our time. Recently, she was in India to attend Jaipur Literary festival where she talked about the major concerns of women's liberation movement today. She said that feminist movement has matured now attaining majority support and quite often succeeding in achieving political support also. She referred to Delhi gang rape case and said that it is as though there is a sudden and dramatic realization in Indian Women of their self-worth. It was like lightening a match to dry tinder. Twenty years ago, women would have been

suppressed. Now they demand justice, not protection. Women have now realized that what they need is justice, not protection. Even men have now tired of playing the role of protectors. They too have realized the gender stereotypes are not good for them too. Gloria Steinem's feminist views are original and profoundly relevant today. Gloria Steinem was born on March 25, 1934 in Toledo, Ohio (USA). She is a political social activist who became nationally recognized as a spokesperson of women's liberation movement. She emerged as a feminist activist during the 1960's and 1970's. She is also a prominent

writer and a recognized counterculture political figure. She wrote columns for the New York Magazine and co-founded magazine 'Ms'. She wrote an article *After Black Power, women's Liberation* in 1969 which made her a famous national feminist. In 2005, Steinem worked with Jane Fonda and co-founded women's Media center that works for amplifying women's voices in the media through advocacy, media and training. Even at the age of 79, She is an active commentator, writer, organizer, lecturer and activist. Steinem was born of Leo Steinem, the son of a Jewish immigrant from Germany and Poland and Ruth Nuneviller, a Presbyterian Scottish and German descent. Her parents lived and travelled about in a trailer from which Leo her father worked as an antiques dealer. When Gloria was only three, her mother suffered a severe nervous breakdown that trapped her in delusions and fantasies. She had to spend long periods in sanatoriums for the mentally challenged. In 1944, her parents separated and her father went to California for work while she and her mother lived in Toledo, Ohio. The breakup made deep impact on her emotionally and psychologically. Her father had never provided a stable financial support to the

family but his exit naturally aggravated the situation. Her mother did not hold on to a job for longer periods as there was a general hostility towards working women in those days. Gloria also saw that doctors treated women in apathetic manner. Many years later, Steinem described her mother's experiences being fundamental to her understanding of social injustices against women. She realized that women did not enjoy social and political equality which is the basis of true and healthy feminist ideology.

Steinem attended Waite High School in Toledo and Western High School in Washington D.C. from which she graduated before attending Smith College. She spent two years in India in the late 1950's as a Chester Bowles Asian Fellow. On her return to the USA, she served as a director of the Independent Research Service. It was funded by a secret donor. Later, it turned out to be the CIA. In 1960, she joined Warren Publishing as a part of the 'Help!' magazine. Her journalism career started when she was assigned to write regarding contraception.

For some time, she was employed at New York Playboy Club as Playboy Bunny but eventually she landed a job at New York magazine in 1968. Her playboy bunny

experience was later made into a film in 1985 titled 'A Bunny Tale'. Bunnies are women waitresses in night clubs wearing the costume with rabbit ears and tail. Steinem had detailed how women were treated at clubs and how sexual demands were made of bunnies at these clubs. In 1964, she conducted an interview with John Lemon and in 1969, she covered an abortion speak-out for New York magazine. She later said that her career as a feminist started at that point of time. She had undergone abortion at the age of 22. Later she reflected,

I knew it was it was the first time I had taken responsibility for my own life. I wasn't going to let things happen to me. I was going to direct my life and therefore I felt positive.

Later Steinem invented a term 'reproductive freedom' that includes the freedom to have children or not to. In 1972, she co-founded a feminist magazine 'MS' which actually began as a special edition of New York. When its first regular issue hit the news stands, in three days, 300000 copies were sold. She continued to write for it until it was sold in 1987. However, she is among its advisory board till date.

Gloria Steinem has remained politically active throughout her life. She has championed for Equal Rights Amendment in addition to several social reforms and laws. She has been a great champion of equality between men and women. She has fought against discriminatory laws that gave men superior rights in marriage and denied equal economic opportunities to women. She founded and co-founded several activist groups including 'The Women's Action Alliance', 'The MS, Foundation for Women', 'Choice USA; and Women's Media Center'. In 1968, she launched a protest against War Tax vowing to refuse to pay tax against the Vietnam war. In 1969, she published an article *After Black Power, Women's Liberation* which made her a truly national feminist figure. In 1970, she wrote an essay on *What It Would Be like If Women Win* for Time Magazine which can be called a Utopia of equality of women.

Gloria Steinem along with Betty Friedan, Fanny Lou Hammer, Myrlie Evers and several US representatives founded the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). She delivered a memorable speech as the co-convener of the Caucus 'Address to the Women of America'. She said,

This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. Sex and race because they are easy and visible differences have been the primary way of organizing human beings into superior and inferior groups and into the cheap labour on which this system still depends. We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.

In 1972, she played an important role in supporting the increase in representation of women in social and political arena. Steinem was questioned whether she was still involved in CIA and whether she was installed as the leader of the movement under political. She denied any kind of involvement with the CIA in 1975. She had founded a coalition of Labour Union Women in 1974 and participated in the National Conference of women in Houston, Texas.

Steinem played a variety of roles within Women's Action Alliance aiming at elimination of economic and social discrimination. She was active in working for civil rights for African Americans, Hispanics and other minorities. She took a public stance in favour of gay rights and animal rights. She staunchly opposed genital mutilation and human trafficking.

The feminist slogan, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle" is falsely attributed to Steinem. In fact, the phrase is borrowed from Irina Dunn.

During 1980s and 1990s, Steinem suffered several personal problems including diagnosis of breast cancer and terminal neuralgia. However, she continued to be amidst the whirlpool of activities. In 1992, she co-founded 'Choice USA' a non-profit organisation supporting reproductive rights. She opposed Gulf war asserting that defending democracy was a pretence.

At the age of 66, in 2000, Steinem married David Bale who died in 2003. She was named the American Humanist's Association's 2012 'Humanist of the year' for her activism in feminist movement and LGBT rights. Steinem was involved in political campaigns since 1952 presidential campaign. In 1968 election, she supported MC Govern nomination and in 1971, National Women's Political Caucus was founded by Steinem, Betty Friedan, Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug. Germaine Greer was critical of Steinem's capitulation on abortion rights. In 1972 convention, the two had met for the first time. In 2004 election, Steinem fiercely criticised Bush administration for its hostility towards women's rights. She said,

“ If he is elected in 2004, abortion will be criminalized in the country.” She strongly held that Bush was a danger to health and safety of women. She claimed that Bush had been against reproductive freedom, sex education, AIDS relief and Clean Water Act. She actively participated in 2008 presidential campaign supporting both Clinton and Obama for their active support to feminism, civil rights and environment preservation.

Gloria Steinem said that it is not race but gender that has been the most restricting force in American life. Her social and feminist views often overlap the various schools of feminism. Though she is often called a liberal feminist, she has repeatedly characterised as a radical feminist. The fact is Steinem has taken firm stand over several important issues such as reproductive rights and abortion. She has been a staunch advocate of reproductive freedom, that is women’s freedom to produce children or not. She says that reproduction rights of women are equivalent to true equality and freedom of women. Women’s bodies have been regarded as a means of reproducing workers, the means of mitigating class, racial division and the biggest source of cheap labour in the world. Politicians are

nationalizing women’s bodies by criminalizing abortion. She says, “Controlling women’s bodies as a means of reproduction-that’s the definition of patriarchy.” Women’s bodies- their reproductive system and their safety are still the battle ground as they are the means of restricting their freedom, birth control and safe abortion. They are turned into factories to produce cheap labour. The patriarchal state or religion or family wanted to control reproduction –to decide how many workers nation needs and who owned them in systems of legitimacy. Even though there is no obvious slavery, The International Labour Organisation says there are about 12 million people living in literal slavery around the world and 80% of them are women and girls. In ancient cultures, women knew how to restrict births through herbs and timings in sexual intercourse. The focus on men’s control over women as a means of reproduction came later with the idea of children as property and labour.

She favoured abortion equating it with women’s reproductive freedom. She had undergone abortion at a young age and she said that she never felt bad about it. On the contrary, she felt positive thinking that she was taking responsibility for her own life

and she was going to direct it in her own way. In a documentary 'My Feminism', she characterized abortion is a pivotal and constructive experience.

Gloria Steinem is staunch critic of pornography. She distinguishes it from erotica. She says;

"Erotica is as different from pornography as love is from rape, as dignity from humiliation, as partnership is from slavery, as pleasure is from pain." She says that pornography is a commodification of women's body. It is a subtle form of slavery of women and it involves no equal power or mutuality. There is a conqueror-victim paradigm in all kinds of pornography."

Steinem wrote about female genital mutilation in some parts of the world, particularly in some Eastern countries. She reported that around seventy five million women were the victims of genital mutilation It is the result of patriarchy that controls women's bodies as the means of production. It tries to repress the independent power of women's sexuality. She says that male circumcision is also controlling of men's sexuality and submitting the sexual part to patriarchal authority. In ninety percent of cases, it is medically unnecessary.

Regarding same-sex marriage, it is Steinem wrote an essay titled *What Would It Be Like If Women Win* for the 'Time' magazine in 1970. She envisioned a Utopian future when alternative life styles would be available. Population explosion requires limiting child birthing and this will be possible with same sex marriages. There will be alternative notions of the 'families' instead of only parents and children. Single women will have a right to stay single without being ridiculed. Lesbians and homosexuals will have freedom to be legally married complete with mutual support for same sex marriages in early 2000s.

In 1977, Steinem wrote that transsexualism was a diversion from the widespread problem of sexual inequality. She said that she supported the right of the individuals to identify themselves as they choose. However, she did not favour surgical mutilation of bodies in order to conform to gender role that is inexorably tied to physical body parts. She said; "If the shoes don't fit, must we change the foot?" She supported transgender people saying that they also live out real, authentic lives and their lives should be celebrated, not questioned.

Gloria Steinem is a bitter critic of mere academic theorizing and obscurantism in feminist theories. Such theories talk in language no one stands. They are full of incomprehensible abstractions. It is nothing but careerism. She criticizes Judith Butler, the deconstructionist, “ I always wanted to put a sign up on the road to Yale saying, ‘ Beware: Deconstruction Ahead.’ ” She added knowledge that is not accessible to the common people is useless. It becomes aerialised.

Steinem’s major works are as follows:

- *The Thousand Indias (1957)*
- *The Beach Books (1963)*
- *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions (1983)*
- *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem (1992)*
- *Moving Beyond Words (1993)*
- *Doing Sixty & seventy (2006)*

Gloria Steinem recently said that there is growing awareness about women’s rights and people, academics and governments are now supporting feminist cause. She said that in earlier days, feminism was like a curse word. She was labelled as feminazi by a radio commentator. In the beginning feminists were the subject to ridicule. Political activism and participation also

helped the cause of women. Steinem’s message to young women is; “ That each of them is already a unique and valuable person when she is born; every human being is. Inside each of us is a unique person resulting from millennia of environment and heredity combined in a way that could never happen again and could never have happened before. We aren’t blank slates but we are also communal creatures who are born before our brains are fully developed, so we’re very sensitive to our environment. The question is : How to find the support and the circumstances that allow you to express what’s inside you?”

Steinem rejects the superiority of race and colour as she says that the white minority of the world conned people into thinking that white skin made them superior to others. In fact, it makes them more subject to ultraviolet rays and wrinkles. Freud’s notion of ‘ Penis envy’ is quite illogical. The power of giving birth makes ‘womb envy’ more logical, she said. She said that if men menstruated, it would become an enviable, worthy and masculine event on account of patriarchy. It would become the symbol of manhood. The onset of menstruation would be celebrated. If men

could menstruate, she said satirically, the power justifications would go on and on. In an interview with Malini Nair she said that radicalism of young Indian women has awed her profoundly. The post-December 16 gang rape in Delhi, Indian women have awakened. Steinem said that it was like lighting a match to dry tinder. Their energy can not be suppressed anymore. They no longer ask for protection but justice. Regarding the future of feminism, she said it has not failed nor it is irrelevant. It has played its role positively. She added, “ But it took me a while to realize that gender was about controlling profits, controlling production and above all controlling reproduction. The failure was of my imagination, not the movement. It has only been 40 years. Give the movement another 60.” Gloria Steinem has always remained in limelight through her vehement and controversial views. She is a true humanist who refuses to take anything less than equality, freedom and justice for all.

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