

# Feminism as a Social Construct through The Works of Simone De Beauvoir and Meena Kandasamy

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## Abstract

*Feminism has its place in today's vocabulary purely because of the social and other injustices that women have been subjected to. If there was equality in all terms and all humanity were treated alike without any discrimination, we would not have to create a term that stands for a distinct discrimination against the female half of society. This essay attempts to gauge the similarities in thinking between Simone De Beauvoir and Meena Kandasamy who straddle two different time frames but are vocal about their ongoing fight against the subjugation of the feminine. They do not mince their words but rather bring uncomfortable topics to the table in an attempt to bring awareness and break down the existing walls of patriarchy and subservience to men.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Social Construct, Through the Years, Simone De Beauvoir, Meena Kandasamy, Marginalised Lives.*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a social construct as an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society. Feminism is a belief in and advocacy of the sexes' political, economic, and social equality, expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. "Femin-" comes from the Latin root word "Femina," meaning woman. "-ism" is a suffix derived from the Greek "ἰσμός" or "ismós" that turns the preceding noun into a verb, implying a belief, practice, or world view. Feminism is a social construct born from blatant gender inequality which is a call to stand up for an insufferable situation that threatens the female section of society.

The first recorded use of the word in English was in 1851, but at that time it just meant "the state of being feminine". Then, in 1837, French philosopher and utopian socialist Charles Fourier coined the word "féminisme" to mean advocacy of women's rights. The Oxford English Dictionary confirms that "feminist" first appeared there in the late 1800s. But in 1914, there was still some confusion over the term, as Bucky Turco documents on Ratter.

An article from that year in the North Carolina newspaper 'The Robesonian' sums up a misconception many are still working through today. "We are asked, what is feminism? We supposed it is a new term to describe the womanly woman as distinguished from effeminacy. It is rather a term that embodies woman's rights."

The very fact that feminism has evolved as a social construct speaks volumes about the injustices practiced for centuries and still condoned and practiced in an unequal power balance between the sexes. Equality as we know it has been a struggle with the gender wars and cultural and social systems that dictate that women have to struggle for something that is taken for granted as a man. From positions of power, work, education, and caste systems, women are side-lined deeming them physically inferior. Justice deferred is justice denied. From Simone De Beauvoir who wrote passionately to the outspoken Meena Kandasamy, parity of the genders is a war that has not yet been won completely.

Being educated itself is a position of privilege as there are many communities and countries which do not believe

in educating females. Women struggle to be seen and heard in a society dominated by males who propound patriarchy. She is relegated to domestic chores and the rearing of children, citing social mores and duties. Simone De Beauvoir has written about the enduring nature of female oppression and she has been proved right because even today there is still a need to protest for basic women's rights. Feminism would not exist or need to be endorsed if our social structure encompassed the two genders in an inclusive way that did not draw lines, marginalize or dominate the social pathways that we navigate. In "The Second Sex", the title itself shows the subjugation that a woman is subjected to. Simone De Beauvoir is a passionate advocate for the equality of the sexes. She has boldly underlined the origin of this distinction- in the post-war era, H. M. Parshley translated 'The Second Sex' from French to English and described it as "a book on women and her historical and contemporary situation in Western culture, which is scientifically accurate in matters of biology, comprehensive and frank in its treatment of woman's individual development and social relations, illuminated throughout by a wealth of literary and scientific references."

The Second Sex's title itself is definitive of its content. A woman's identity is defined as lesser in all aspects than men's.

'...humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but in relation to him; she is not seen as a self-contained entity...[Woman] is just what man decrees: she is thus referred to as 'the sex', implying that she appeals primarily to the male as a sexual entity. She is sex to him, and not just any sex. She is defined and distinguished in relation to man, rather than in relation to him; she is the incidental, the inessentials as opposed to the essential. She is the Other, while he is the Absolute.'(16) (Beauvoir) The idea that humans form groups to compete with other groups based on shared identity is nothing new in psycho-social theory. We have seen this in tribes, countries, and races. For men, this means there is always the pressure to dominate, and the more you can dominate, the more your compulsion to do it, and social justice is wiped off the charts. As a result of this pressure, men first systematically oppressed women in general to

compensate. Now that the male section of society has passed systematic oppression, they are using cultural and social oppression. It has been pointed out that there is no countermeasure to feminism as a counterbalance because the need for it does not arise. Nowhere is there a section of men that is subjugated by women. It has been more than 50 years since 'The Second Sex' has been published. If one were to ask if women still have to fight for what is genuinely their right to coexist, it is a sad state of affairs that feminism still needs to be expounded to create awareness and fight for justice on many levels. The enduring nature of the reason for so much to be written about feminism can be seen in what Beauvoir says- According to Beauvoir, if a woman wants to free herself from this patriarchal bondage, she has to first realize that all her feminine characteristics are socially constructed and not her true essence. Only by understanding this, a woman can, live a free life with complete agency and not a life of being treated like an accessory of a man.

We can move forward several decades and see the sameness of thought in the works of Meena Kandasamy. She is more emphatic and tears down the bastions of male dominance that still exist. Kandasamy boldly digs out the muffled voices from history and to re-read them retrieve the suffering and pain which are often overshadowed by the false facade of empathy shown by the male-dominant existing socio-political system. She gives voice to the pent-up anger of generations of women bound in caste systems, and social structures that inhibit them and more precisely speaks against the prevalent structures, ancient conventions, and customs that have been and still are used for repeated subjugation. Kandasamy attempts to deconstruct the idea of Western Feminism which tries to universalize the female experience.

This spirit of rebellion resonates through the poem:

Ours is a silence that waits. Endlessly waits ... But sometimes, the outward signals of inward struggles takes colossal forms And the revolution happens because our dreams explode (1-2,7-10)

Feminism exists because no one wants to take a massive 180° turn and acknowledge a collective wrong that has been perpetrated and in recent years glossed over. Kandasamy is explosive in her writings that her poetry is a

powerful testimony to anti-caste feminist literature. Being marginalized by virtue of gender and caste is a given in most third-world countries. As a young wife, she has endured patriarchy at its worst and has suffered at the hands of her husband in the most humiliating way. She reconstructs the images of women inherited from upper-caste male literature. The dichotomy between the literary and the social context diminishes in her works and offers an alternative image of women. She was strong enough to retaliate, walk out and raise her voice against the impunity of generations of women who haven't got justice. And most importantly, she empowers through words, bringing out the strength of language.

“Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry and dangerous portents. Unable to predict when, for what, and for whom she will open her mouth, unable to stitch up her lips, they silence her.” (From Nailed)

What connects Simone de Beauvoir and Meena Kandasamy? They are generations apart and culturally at polar opposites. Their core beliefs are what unite them. Simone De Beauvoir was in a position of privilege in that she was actually heard and her views respected. Meena Kandasamy has the dual advantage of being a new-

generation poet and also taking on the archaic systems prevalent in Indian society. Education and opinions have given them clarity to take on the system which created feminism as a kind of tool to fight to be heard.

A pen is most definitely mightier than a sword and a sword in a woman's hand can rattle patriarchy, giving her immense power: to educate, agitate and organize. It gives them the power to militate. This begs the question: why should women be militant in the first place? Do common sense and education not dictate that there be a fair and impartial ethos in which we live as humans, not subdivided by gender? Masculinity is taken as a foregone conclusion and no 'isms' are attached to it. The pen is sharp in its offering, slashing with powerful words, but the rivers of ink are swamping the globe and yet the stubborn division of justice and genders remains.

#### References

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