

# ***Study of the Development of American Feminism (1790-1990): Three Waves and Interaction with Racial Equality Movement***

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**Abstract:** Since the birth of feminism, it has been committed to pushing for transforming the inequality state between males and females. American feminism achieved incredible achievements within the last three centuries, not only legislatively, but also ideologically. Meanwhile, the feminism of America and another one of the most essential social group that struggled for their own rights of egalitarianism -- African Americans--have been influenced by one another, making progresses in separate or communal interests. This paper will use literature and case analysis to focus on three waves of the development of American feminism and some important interactions between feminism and the racial equality movement, which aims to find out the differences and evolving factors in three stages of American feminism development and analyze whether positive or negative impacts weigh more when racial equality movement interacted with feminism movement. The result of the research is that the first wave of American feminism was liberal feminism with a significant symbol of gaining female suffrage; the second wave of American feminism was more radical and far more concerned with issues of class and race; the third wave of America feminism was less characterized by a specific political agenda and more of a culture revolution. Furthermore, it could be beneficial for both of them when American Feminism cooperates properly with the racial equality movement.

**Keywords:** America, Feminism, Racial equality movement

## **1. Introduction**

Feminism is aimed at defining, establishing, and defending a state of equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for women. It has had a massive influence on American politics [1]. Feminism in the United States is often divided chronologically into first-wave, second-wave, third-wave, and fourth-wave feminism [2]. The fact that the history of American feminism has been well-researched in various fields of scholarship and that the advancement of these topics seems to have reached its zenith does not mean that the study of these topics is useless. The reason to continue exploring is that many studies are still full of controversy, and further study on American feminism in the present day is conducive to young generations by helping them form more profound and objective concepts towards this field. This paper mainly discusses characteristics and evolving factors among three waves of American feminism and how American feminism and the America racial equality movement interact with each other. This paper will use various research methods, including literature, overview, case analysis, as well as historical background information

organization. This article may provide some help and clues to future researchers whose studies are related to the direction of American feminism.

## **2. Early Stages of Feminism**

The idea of feminism can be traced to the period of the Enlightenment. July 14, 1789, the French Revolution broke out. Women picked up weapons and conquered the Bastille together with men, which was the first sound of the feminist movement. The feminist voices of the Renaissance never coalesced into a coherent philosophy or movement. This happened only with the Enlightenment when women began to demand that the new reformist rhetoric about liberty, equality, and natural rights be applied to both sexes [3]. Female clubs started to appear in Paris, which demanded the rights of education and employment for women. Olympe de Gouges, a French woman of letters, in 1791 published the “Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens” on behalf of her club. “Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.” [4]. The declaration also deeply touched British mid-class women. Philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft wrote “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (1792)”. As for the United States, “the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America” was adopted in 1776, particularly its second sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, which became the theoretical basis of American feminism [5]. At the same time, Abigail Adams, the second first lady of the United States, wrote about the troubles and concerns she had as an 18th-century woman [6]. She is known for her March 1776 letter to John and the Continental Congress, requesting for women to vote rights on the grounds of women attending the war. With the beginning of the struggle for voting rights, three waves of America Feminism occurred in succession.

## **3. First Wave Feminism in America (1840-1920)**

First Wave Feminism was mainly led by mid-class white women, whose main objective was seeking recognition of women's suffrage and access to education and employment, which was defined by later scholars as Liberal Feminism. This feminist movement still focuses on equality from a mainly legal perspective [7]. As the achievement of suffrage was the most outstanding, the wave was also known as The Women's Suffrage Movement. In 1848, Seneca Falls held the first women's rights convention in New York. “The Declaration of Sentiments” modeled by Elizabeth Cady Stanton enabled the American feminism movement to have a relatively clear direction. “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal” [8]. In 1868, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and social reformer Susan Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. At that time, the American Civil War had ended. The black male had already gained the right to suffrage, but the female right to suffrage was still without a satisfactory result. American women organized demonstrations and protests, wrote promotional materials, and collected signatures of petitions. The feminist movement spread across the nation while the forms of struggle also became various and radical. In 1917, 218 women from 26 different states were arrested for picketing outside the White House in Washington, D.C.. Women went on hunger strike in prison, and the protests continued. Ultimately, in consideration of public pressure as well as party interest, the Congress and president ratified The 19th Amendment in 1920, and women in the United States officially had the right to vote. Hundreds of years of effort finally had an outcome.

Despite having rights in suffrage, the social state of American females barely changed. Conventional perceptions were still deep-rooted. “Mother” continued to be the only possible social

role that women could play. Besides, this movement led mainly by white females did not share benefits with black people. Black women still had difficulty participating in suffrage.

#### **4. Second Wave Feminism in America(1960s-1990s)**

The Second Wave Feminism began to crest in the 1960s and continued well into the 1990s, also known as the Emancipation of Female, whose core goal was to eliminate inequality between two genders, break down the conception that women must be attached to men, and seek legal entities for women. The problems this wave directed at included politics, law, cultural conventions, and sex discrimination. In addition, reproductive freedom, domestic violence and sex harassment in private areas were also mentioned. “The personal is political” was a significant slogan at that time. Furthermore, the slogan tackles the perception that women enjoy a transcendent identity irrespective of ethnicity, race, class, culture, marital status, sexuality and (dis)ability by encouraging individuals to think about personal experience politically [9]. World War Two promoted female employment, which enabled female economic status to increase unprecedentedly. American females became more concerned about self-interests, plus more females receiving education, accumulating strength for the Second Wave Feminism in America. Meanwhile, many veterans retired from the army, resulting in social opinions that advocated women should return home and be happy housewives. Betty Friedan strongly condemned the view that women had to sacrifice for the family in her book “The Feminine Mystique”, causing a nationwide sensation. At the same time, the African-American Civil Rights Movement appealed great amount of participants among females. However, many sex discrimination problems existing in the African-American Civil Rights Movement further prompted self-consciousness awakening among American females. Second Wave Feminism was born at the proper time, aiming to fight against the gender culture of the whole society. Despite the splintering of groups in the second-wave era of feminism, significant achievements were made for females: The supreme court case Pittsburgh Press versus Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations struck down sex-segregated job advertisements; Congress passed the Title IX act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs; and also Congress passed the “Equal Employment Opportunity Act”, which barred employers for dismissing women employees on the basis of sex or pregnancy.

Second Wave Feminism in America was mainly divided into two factions. One is the moderates led by white mid-class females, who stand for exerting pressure in public areas legally. On the other hand, the radicals consisting of educated youth and female college students paid more attention to inequality in private areas, such as autonomy in marriage and reproductive rights. Moreover, they focused more on realizing the union across race and class. Afterward, black females and lesbians gradually took part in the movement.

#### **5. Third Wave Feminism in America (from 1990s)**

In 1992, Rebecca Walker published an essay entitled “Becoming the Third Wave”, which was considered to be the beginning of Third Wave Feminism in America. Feminism in this wave holds the view that the first and second waves were not only obsolete but also conservatively limited in a patriarchal frame. They advocated attaching more importance to what people used to ignore, such as Multi-ethnic religious beliefs, multi-culture, environmental protection, consumerism and multi-sexual orientation, etc. This was the case not only for racialized or working-class women, but also for masculine, lesbian, or non-binary women [10]. Most third wavers are probably known for appropriating derogatory terms like “slut” and “bitch” in order to subvert sexist culture and deprive it of verbal weapons. They also have the tendency to refuse to identify as a feminist or reject the label completely, arguing that the term itself entrenches the movement of gender exclusion. This

definition and subsequent resignation of feminism has also been highly popularized by the media and American celebrities. Lady Gaga responded when being asked whether she was a feminist: “No, I love men.” And Taylor Swift claimed that she was not a feminist because she does not “think about things as guys versus girls”.

Compared with former waves of feminism, Third Wave Feminism in America did not have a clear political appeal. Instead, people seemed to pay more attention to individual experiences, showing more inclusive and multiple attitudes, so it was more like a cultural revolution. More feminist groups based on different theories emerged during this era and explored possibilities to achieve gender equality from various perspectives.

## **6. Interaction between Feminism and Racial Equality Movement in the United States**

The three waves of feminism have the tendency to make objective progress by being concerned more with the race issue. In fact, when American females struggled for access to education, American society was undergoing the Abolitionist Revolution. The earliest feminists took positive parts in the anti-slavery struggle. Sarah Moore Grimké (1792–1873) and Angelina Emily Grimké (1805–1879), known as the Grimké sisters, were the first nationally known white American female advocates of the abolition of slavery and women's rights [11]. After issuing the “Emancipation Proclamation”, Abraham Lincoln had the tendency to hold a firm attitude towards the southern states. However, the North Army was still at a disadvantage on the battlefield. At that time, it was almost hopeless that Congress could pass “the Amendment to the U.S. Constitution”, which abolished slavery permanently. Feminist leaders restarted to take action, devoting themselves to pushing forward the passage of the “Amendment to the U.S. Constitution”.

Angelina Grimké wrote a series of letters to state her personal appreciation for people of color, one of them said “It is because I love the colored Americans that I want them to stay in this country; and in order to make it a happy home to them, I am trying to talk down, and write down, and live down this horrible prejudice” [12]. In a common effort of feminists, abolitionists and the public, the “Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution” officially passed, and the slavery system was officially abolished. However, there were cases in which American feminists and racial equality activists could not form an alliance. As mentioned before when talking about the first wave of American feminism, after the Civil War, both American feminists and people of color desired the right of suffrage. Starting out stepping into the political area, feminist leaders did not expect such a complicated situation. Later the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution passed, ensuring black males had the right of suffrage but all females were excluded. People of color who used to be abolitionists would not let anything hinder the process of black people gaining the right of suffrage. Feminist leaders made every effort to prevent the passage of the amendments only to get abandoned by former allies. It is admitted that there is no possibility that different interest groups can completely support each other, but it is also undeniable that American feminism played an active role in the career of liberation for black people. The gradual participation in American feminism by colored people was a progressive sign, which provided more broader horizon and a promising future for the feminist career.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper focuses on the study of the three waves of American feminism along with the interaction between American feminism and the racial equality movement. It can be concluded that the three waves of American feminism, have the tendency to become more and more concerned about wider and deeper social issues. Each of the three waves has its own specific characteristics: the first wave of American feminism was liberal feminism with a significant symbol of gaining female suffrage;

the second wave of American feminism was more radical and developed into different factions; the third wave of American feminism was less characterized by a specific political agenda, and more of a culture revolution. Furthermore, it could be beneficial for both of them when American Feminism cooperates properly with the racial equality movement. There is still room for further improvement and enhancement of this paper. The next step will be to conduct deeper research on the history of American feminism and the relationship between American feminism and the racial equality movement.

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