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## Book Review: Feminism

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*Feminism*. June Hannam, 2007, Harlow, England: Pearson-Longman, xvi + 188 pp (includes, bibliography and index), \$15.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Aditi Mitra, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

Historian June Hannam takes up the difficult task of providing a concise understanding of the complex, controversial and often misunderstood world movement and social theory called 'feminism'. In particular this book, *Feminism*, provides a political and cultural context of the evolution of feminism as a movement over the past two centuries. By dissecting histories and traditional ideologies, Hannam identifies broad social phenomena that highlight the varieties of feminism and the different political and social trends that have changed gender politics around the world. Interestingly, the author starts by asking "does feminism really exist?" and if yes, then can a "common sisterhood" be possible? In addressing these fundamental questions historically, she also explores feminism, internationalism and nationalism in the twentieth century and beyond.

To initiate the discussion, Hannam borrows a British suffragist's poignant claim that other movements towards freedom have aimed at raising the status of a comparatively small group or class of people, while the women's movement aims at raising the status of half the human race. Indeed, feminism has the potential to "turn the world upside down" with irrevocable changes in the realm of women's status, rights and consciousness-raising for women as social and political agents.

Hannam goes on to succinctly expose how feminism has never really been a monolithic movement, but at the same time, she helps the reader grasp certain basic premises of feminism. Starting with the complexities of defining feminism, with its wide range of attitudes, concerns and strategies, the author suggests three defining characteristics to simplify its understanding as an ideology: first, a recognition of an imbalance of power between the sexes, with women in a subordinate role to men; second, a belief that women's condition is socially constructed and therefore can be changed; and third, an emphasis on female autonomy. In this analysis, she briefly touches upon different types of feminisms (Socialist Feminism, Radical Feminism and so on) but does not explore them as theoretical perspectives. Those looking for a theoretical discussion on feminism may have to rely on other sources. But if the goal is to understand feminism as a social movement, then the reader will find this book adequate.

Throughout the book, Hannam attempts to fill in the gaps among the women's suffrage movements, the anti-slavery movements, black civil rights movements, the anti-war movements and the feminist movements for those who have not yet been able to connect these seemingly separate social movements. Moreover, she helps the reader understand the linkages between the first, second and third waves of feminism. In addition, she introduces recent interpretations and approaches to understanding the future of feminism as a universal movement no longer rooted in Western feminism.

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<sup>1</sup> Aditi Mitra is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Trained in India, the Middle-East, UK and the U.S, her areas of specialization are Social Inequality, Social Psychology, Race, Gender, Mass Media and International Relations. Her current research includes Race Relations, Gender Inequality, Non-governmental Organizations and Development of International Women's Studies.

In comparing the vibrant suffrage movements with the inter-war years of abeyance, another vital aspect of feminism brought up is the importance of women's organizations and international networks. Hannam argues that in spite of differences in race, class and political beliefs, universal oppression of women was eventually acknowledged by women activists. The mobilization of women across the world and the growing awareness of the discrimination faced by women led to the birth of many international women's alliances. She cites how the National Women's Suffrage Associations in many countries connected with the International Women's Suffrage Alliance so that they could help each other become a more effective and stronger force to be reckoned with. By the late 1970s, the feminist movement had reached women from all social classes and had expanded the definition of feminist struggle. Significantly, even the United Nations had stepped in to exert pressure for change in many countries through organized forums and international conferences promoting gender equity and women's human rights.

Increasingly, political, economic and cultural globalization are linking women together across national boundaries and raising the possibility of joint action against common forms of oppression. Unlike most books that deal with the growth of feminism in western societies only, Hannam also looks at the rise and impact of feminism in non-western societies. Using jargon-free prose, which is comprehensible to the interested but non-expert reader, the origins of feminism from its conception to the present are explored using both a chronological and a comparative approach. Consequently, the key themes investigated in this book include the challenge made by feminists to prevailing ideas about a 'woman's place', the notions of sisterhood and solidarity, and the relationship between feminism and other social and political reform movements, including nationalist struggles, socialist politics and anti-colonial movements.

In a related vein, Hannam discusses the fragmentation of the feminist movement into various strands such as the Third World feminists, Black Feminists, Lesbian Feminists, Asian Feminists, Islamic Feminists and the like. In doing so, the author does not gloss over the issues that have provoked the vigorous debate and fierce antagonisms that have unrelentingly persisted to the present day. Although not in detail, she discusses some of these potential obstacles and the notorious backlash that feminism has faced along with its growing popularity and significance worldwide.

As pointed out earlier, this book's appeal lies in the fact that it explores the chronological history of feminism in several countries spanning several continents. It consists of a total of seven chapters but additional, synoptic information is very easily found in the book. For example, the "Who's Who" section at the beginning of the book provides brief biographies of outstanding women who made history in various parts of the world by propelling change in gender-role dynamics through social and political struggles. Women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Susan B. Anthony, Bertha Lutz, Sarojini Naidu, Huda Sha'rawi and bell hooks are all part of this list that helps put a face to the various global women's movements. Equally helpful to the non-specialist readers is the table of "Key Dates" that provides a chronological overview of world events (from the time of the enlightenment debates on universal human reason in the 1700s to the U.N World Conference on Women in the 1990s ) that directly or indirectly impacted the evolution of the women's movements worldwide. The recommended list of "Further Reading" at the end of each chapter provides valuable resources that allow the more

eager reader to further explore these complex social issues and conduct comparative studies to better understand and experience feminism globally.

The general public and undergraduate students studying feminism as part of a history, politics, sociology or other interdisciplinary course will find this book quite useful as a short but comprehensive introduction to feminism. However, a lack of any in-depth discussion makes this book not suitable for a graduate class or seminar. Using additional essays and specialized research material by other scholars on the numerous issues, raised, albeit briefly, in this book can enhance the reader's perceptions. In addition, the book helps bring clarity and scope for critical thinking to related global gender matters and emergent movements, which are currently contending for attention in both academic and social circles.