



## Global Feminist Thought: From Liberal Foundations to Intersectional Voices

**Dr. Prajakta Pimpalshende**  
*PES Modern Law College, Pune*

---

### Abstract

*This paper critically examines the evolution of feminist thought through key global feminist thinkers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maya Angelou. It traces the development of feminism from liberal and existential foundations to intersectional and experiential frameworks. The study highlights how early Universalist feminist assumptions were challenged by feminists addressing race, class, and lived experience. The article argues that contemporary feminism must adopt plural, context-sensitive approaches to achieve substantive equality and dignity.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Global Feminism, Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism is not a monolithic ideology but a diverse body of thought, activism, and legal intervention shaped by distinct historical, cultural, and social contexts. While early feminist movements primarily emerged within Western liberal traditions, contemporary feminist scholarship has increasingly questioned their Universalist assumptions and exclusionary frameworks. Feminist theory has thus evolved from demands for formal legal equality to more complex analyses of power, identity, and structural injustice.

The development of feminist thought reflects a gradual expansion in focus—from rationality and citizenship, to social construction of gender, and finally to lived experience and intersectionality. Thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maya Angelou represent critical moments in this intellectual progression. Their contributions illustrate how feminist discourse has moved beyond abstract legal rights to engage with questions of dignity, economic independence, bodily autonomy, race, and historical oppression.

This paper critically examines the contributions of these feminist thinkers to global feminist theory, highlighting both the transformative potential and the limitations of mainstream feminist frameworks. It argues that contemporary feminism must move beyond uniform notions of equality and instead adopt plural, context-sensitive approaches capable of addressing intersecting forms of subordination. By tracing the evolution of feminist thought across liberal, existential, and experiential perspectives, the paper situates feminism as a dynamic and continually evolving project committed to substantive justice rather than mere formal equality.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist scholarship has evolved through multiple intellectual phases, each shaped by the socio-political conditions of its time and responding to distinct forms of women's subordination. Early feminist literature was dominated by liberal frameworks that sought inclusion of women within existing legal and political structures. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) represents a foundational text in this tradition. Wollstonecraft challenged Enlightenment thinkers who proclaimed liberty and equality while simultaneously excluding women from citizenship. She argued that women's perceived inferiority was not natural but socially produced through denial of education, legal autonomy, and political participation. By grounding equality in rationality and moral agency, Wollstonecraft laid the theoretical basis for later constitutional equality and anti-discrimination jurisprudence. However, her work has also been critiqued within feminist literature for its Universalist assumptions and its limited engagement with class, race, and colonial hierarchies.

A significant shift in feminist theory occurred with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist intervention in *The Second Sex* (1949). Rejecting biological determinism, de Beauvoir conceptualized womanhood as a social and historical construction, famously asserting that "one is not born, but becomes, a woman." Drawing upon Hegelian philosophy, she explained how men occupy the position of the "Subject" while women are relegated to the status of the "Other" within culture, language, and law. De Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence exposed how legal, economic, and social institutions confine women to unpaid domestic labour and dependence, while reserving autonomy, creativity, and public participation for men. Her emphasis on economic independence and bodily autonomy as prerequisites for freedom significantly influenced feminist critiques of labour law, reproductive rights, and dignity-based interpretations of equality. Nevertheless, feminist scholars have noted the Eurocentric orientation of her analysis and its limited engagement with non-Western and postcolonial realities.

Later feminist literature expanded beyond abstract theory to foreground lived experience and intersecting systems of oppression. Maya Angelou's autobiographical and poetic works, particularly *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), constitute a powerful contribution to feminist thought rooted in narrative and testimony. Angelou articulated the realities of Black womanhood shaped simultaneously by race, gender, and historical oppression. Although not

framed as formal legal theory, her work exposed the inadequacy of liberal equality frameworks by demonstrating how structural injustice persists despite formal legal rights. Through themes of voice, silence, bodily autonomy, and dignity, Angelou anticipated intersectional feminism long before the concept was formally articulated, illustrating how women's subordination cannot be understood through a single axis of identity.

Collectively, the feminist literature represented by Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, and Angelou reflects the progressive expansion of feminist thought—from demands for formal equality to critiques emphasizing substantive justice, dignity, and lived experience. Contemporary feminist scholarship draws upon this intellectual lineage to challenge Universalist assumptions and to advocate context-sensitive feminist frameworks that address structural inequalities across diverse social, cultural, and legal contexts.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

3. This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and analytical research methodology. The research is based on a critical examination of feminist theoretical literature rather than empirical fieldwork. Primary sources include foundational feminist texts such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and the autobiographical and poetic writings of Maya Angelou. These works are treated as primary texts for understanding the evolution of feminist thought across liberal, existential, and experiential frameworks.
4. The research procedure involves close textual analysis of these feminist writings to identify core theoretical concepts, normative claims, and critiques of legal and social institutions. Particular attention is paid to themes such as equality, rationality, gender construction, economic independence, bodily autonomy, and lived experience. The study further situates these ideas within broader feminist jurisprudential debates, examining how feminist theory has responded to and critiqued formal notions of equality.
5. Data collection for the study is limited to secondary sources, including scholarly feminist literature, theoretical analyses, and interpretive commentaries that contextualize the selected feminist texts. No human participants were involved in the research, as the study does not rely on interviews, surveys, or empirical observation. Instead, the methodology emphasizes conceptual clarity, critical engagement, and comparative analysis to assess the contributions and limitations of different feminist perspectives.
6. This doctrinal approach enables a nuanced understanding of feminism as an evolving intellectual tradition and allows for a critical evaluation of how feminist theory has expanded to address intersecting forms of subordination beyond gender alone.

## **3. RESULTS:**

4. The analysis of feminist literature reveals a clear evolution in feminist thought from formal equality-based frameworks to more complex, context-sensitive approaches addressing structural and intersecting forms of oppression. The study identifies three major findings corresponding to the contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maya Angelou.
5. First, the findings indicate that early liberal feminist theory, as articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft, primarily conceptualized gender equality in terms of rationality, education, and legal personhood. Wollstonecraft's work demonstrates that women's subordination was historically justified through denial of education and legal autonomy rather than inherent incapacity. This framework significantly influenced later equality-based legal reforms but was limited in its capacity to address social hierarchies beyond gender, such as race and class.
6. Second, the analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist theory reveals a shift from formal legal equality to the social construction of womanhood. De Beauvoir's conceptualization of women as the "Other" highlights how legal, economic, and cultural institutions systematically confine women to roles of immanence while enabling men's transcendence. The findings underscore that legal equality alone is insufficient in the absence of economic independence and bodily autonomy, thereby expanding feminist engagement with labour rights, reproductive freedom, and dignity-based legal interpretations.
7. Third, the findings derived from Maya Angelou's feminist contributions demonstrate the centrality of lived experience, narrative, and intersectionality in feminist theory. Angelou's work reveals that formal equality frameworks often fail marginalized women whose oppression is shaped by overlapping systems of race and gender. The analysis shows that voice, bodily autonomy, and dignity function as critical feminist tools to challenge structural silencing and exclusion, particularly for Black women and other historically marginalized groups.
8. Collectively, these findings indicate that feminist theory has progressively moved toward substantive equality and contextual justice. The results highlight that contemporary feminist thought cannot rely on uniform or universal models of equality but must instead incorporate plural perspectives that address intersecting identities and structural inequalities. The findings of this doctrinal analysis form the basis for the interpretive discussion that follows.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

##### **I. Mary Wollstonecraft and the Foundations of Liberal Feminist Theory**

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is usually regarded as the founder of liberal feminist thought. Her writing challenged the exclusion of women from the ideals of reason, liberty, and equality that powered political philosophy of that time. Her work '*A Vindication of the*

*Rights of Woman*'(1792), constitutes a logical critique of patriarchal social and legal institutions that denied women civil and political rights.

### **A Rationality as the Basis of Equality**

Wollstonecraft in her feminist theory gives the assertion that women are rational human beings, equally potential and capacity for reason as men. She opposed the dominant belief that women were naturally lesser in intellect and morality, the inferiority of women is because of denial in education and social condition. According to Wollstonecraft, omission of women from right of citizenship which don't have philosophical and legal justification from the moral foundation of human rights. This dispute directly attacked the legal systems that treated women as dependents and justified inequality on biological determinism. Wollstonecraft thus laid the groundwork for later equality jurisprudence by linking rationality, moral agency, and legal personhood.

### **B. Education as an Instrument of Emancipation**

Education is identified as the primary means through which women's subordination could be removed. She attacked the old education practices that focused on refining beauty, obedience and feminine growth / enhancement rather than intellectual growth/ development. Education gives independence to women which make her independent. She supported for equal education for women emphasizing that educated women definitely add values to society as independent individuals rather than mere companions or wives. Later on legal reforms influenced related to women's schooling, professions and public life.

### **C. Critique of Marriage and Legal Dependency ki**

Wollstonecraft made a sarcastic critique of marriage as a legal institution that subordinated women. She compared marriage based on inequality to a form of legalized servitude, wherein women surrendered autonomy in exchange for economic security. She strongly opposed the dominance of some customs like no rights to women in property, consideration of wives as invisible coverture as a consequence of marriage, women are considered as perpetual minors under male guardianship. Later on family law, marital property regimes and guardianship norms were developed because of her contribution towards feminist legal reform movements.

### **D. Liberal Feminism and Formal Equality**

Wollstonecraft's feminism demands equality in prevailing political and legal frameworks rather than their radical overthrow so it is considered as liberal feminism. She demanded equal civil and political rights, as she considered women are independent personality and should be treated as same. Constitutional equality and anti- discrimination laws was taken shape because of her emphasize on equality. Wollstonecraft theory was criticized for its Universalist assumptions, middle class bias and limited engagement with race, caste and colonialism.

## **II. Simone de Beauvoir and Existential Feminist Theory**

A. Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) her work *The Second Sex* (1949) is a monumental work. She analysed feminism and gave the theory of legal inequality to social construction of womanhood. **Her slogan of feminism is “One Is Not Born, But Becomes, a Woman”**womenis not a biologically predetermined but it is society which makes her women. Simone rejected biological determinism and exposed gender roles as output of historical, cultural and social forces. This analysis pulls down old deep rooted thought for discrimination on natural differences between men and women.

### **B. Woman as the ‘Other’**

**De Beauvoir relies on the Hegelian theory and point out that men get all the positions of Subject while women are to be considered as other / secondary. While discussing the status of ‘she’** de Beauvoir takes the ground of language, culture, religion, and law. Women are defined through the eyes of Men, leading to structural exclusion.

### **C. Immanence and Transcendence**

De Beauvoir’s central theory is emphasized on contradiction between ‘immanence and transcendence.’ **Immanence** refers to gendered division of domestic unpaid labor which is imposed on women. **Transcendence** represents creativity, autonomy and self- development are reserved for men. According to de Beauvoir social and legal institutions restricts women to Legal and social institutions, according to de Beauvoir, confine women to intrinsic nature by restricting access to education, employment, and bodily autonomy.

### **D. Economic Independence and Liberation**

De Beauvoir intensified that economic independence is more important than legal equality. As women are dependent on men which is patriarchal domination and limits her freedom. Employment and financial autonomy were essential for genuine freedom. De Beauvoir’s theory highly influenced labour law, equal pay legislation and welfare policy.

### **E. Sexuality and Bodily Autonomy**

De Beauvoir’s pointed out that controlled capacity of sexuality and reproductive capacity by social and legal norms are the primary mechanism of oppression supporting bodily autonomy as a core condition of freedom. Her work continues to shape feminist jurisprudence on privacy, reproductive rights, and sexual autonomy.

While transformative, de Beauvoir’s theory has been critiqued for its Eurocentric focus and limited engagement with race, caste, and colonial contexts. At the same time, *The Second Sex* remains foundational to radical feminism, gender theory, and dignity-based constitutional interpretation.

## **III. Contribution of Maya Angelou to Feminism: An Intersectional and Experiential Perspective**

Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was a distinguished feminist as a poet, autobiographer, activist and cultural critic whose work highlighted the lived experiences of Black women. Her theory

is different from early liberal or existential feminists, Angelou's contribution to feminism lies not in abstract theory but in **narrative, testimony, and embodied resistance**. She shaped **intersectional feminism**, emphasizing the inseparability of gender, race, class, and historical oppression.

### **A. Feminism Rooted in Lived Experience**

Angelou's feminist contribution is grounded in the expression of personal experience as political truth. Her autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, uncovered *sexual violence, racial humiliation and silencing of Black women in American society*. Angelou reinterpreted Black womanhood as robust, self-aware, and dignified by describing tragedy without victimization. Her strategy criticized conventional feminism for marginalizing women of color while elevating the experiences of white, middle-class women. As a result, Angelou broadened the scope of feminist discourse to incorporate perspectives that had previously been marginalized in academic, legal, and cultural contexts.

### **B. Voice, Silence, and Feminist Resistance**

Voice—the conversion of silence into speech as an act of resistance—is a major element in Angelou's feminism. After being sexually abused as a youngster, Angelou spent years in silence before reclaiming language as a means of emancipation. This focus is consistent with feminist legal critiques that point to silencing as a structural oppressive mechanism, especially in situations involving racial discrimination and sexual abuse. Angelou's insistence on revealing the truth is consistent with modern feminist jurisprudence, which values narrative justice and survivor testimony.

### **C. Intersectionality Before the Term**

Angelou's writings exemplify intersectional feminism decades before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989. She continuously illustrated how Black women's subjugation is shaped by both gender and ethnicity.

Angelou asserts her dignity and defiance against sexism and racist dominance in poems like *Still I Rise*. Her writings oppose identity fragmentation and contend that freedom necessitates addressing several overlapping oppressive institutions.

### **D. Reclaiming Black Womanhood and Bodily Autonomy**

Black women's stereotypes as either hypersexualized or morally defective were contested by Angelou. She reclaimed Black women's bodies as places of joy, dignity, and self-definition via poetry and prose.

There are significant legal and feminist ramifications to this reclamation. It challenges policies and procedures that regulate women's bodies. It influences autonomy interpretations based on dignity. It backs feminist assertions of self-respect and bodily integrity.

Thus, constitutional frameworks that view dignity as essential to equality and freedom are complemented by Angelou's feminism.

## **E. Feminism, Race, and Law**

By highlighting the ways in which formal equality under the law fails marginalized women, Angelou's work indirectly inspired feminist legal philosophy. Her writings demonstrate that:- Legal rights are insufficient in the absence of social acceptance.

Discrimination is experienced differently by racialized women, Rather than focusing only on individual rights, feminism must address structural inequality.

These observations are consistent with feminist legal theory criticisms that oppose liberal conceptions of equality and promote substantive and transformative justice.

## **F. Global Feminist Significance**

Despite having its roots in African American history, Angelou's feminism has a universal appeal. Women in postcolonial, caste-based, and racially stratified civilizations can relate to her articulation of oppression, survival, and dignity. Angelou's writings and their own battles against intersecting systems have been compared by feminists in the Global South.

In this way, by emphasizing human dignity, collective memory, and resistance, Angelou connects Western and non-Western feminist discourses.

## **G. Critical Evaluation**

Despite her enormous contribution, Angelou's writing has periodically come under fire for:- Insufficient interaction with formal legal or political philosophy

Prioritizing personal storytelling over institutional criticism

These criticisms, however, undervalue the jurisprudence significance of story, which is now commonly recognized in feminist legal studies. Storytelling itself can serve as a feminist intervention strategy, as Angelou's work shows.

## **CONCLUSION:**

This paper demonstrates that feminist thought, as reflected in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maya Angelou, represents an expanding critique of inequality rather than a single unified theory. Together, their contributions trace feminism's movement from demands for formal legal equality to deeper engagements with social construction, material conditions, and lived experience.

Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism laid the foundational claim that women are rational moral agents entitled to education, legal personhood, and civic participation. Her work challenged the philosophical basis of women's exclusion and significantly shaped equality-based legal reforms. However, its emphasis on formal equality within existing structures limited its ability to address deeper social and historical hierarchies.

De Beauvoir extended feminist inquiry by exposing womanhood as a socially constructed condition sustained through economic dependence, cultural norms, and institutional power.

By conceptualizing women as the “Other” and emphasizing bodily autonomy and economic independence, she demonstrated that legal equality is insufficient without structural transformation. Her analysis redirected feminist thought toward substantive freedom and dignity.

Maya Angelou further expanded feminist theory by centering lived experience and intersecting systems of oppression. Through narrative and testimony, she revealed how race and gender operate simultaneously to marginalize women, exposing the limitations of universal feminist frameworks. Her work affirms that dignity, voice, and recognition are essential to any meaningful conception of equality.

Collectively, these feminist perspectives underscore the necessity of moving beyond uniform models of equality toward plural, context-sensitive approaches. Contemporary feminism must therefore pursue substantive justice—one that accounts for structural inequality, intersecting identities, and lived realities—if equality is to be meaningful rather than merely formal.

## **REFERENCES:**

1. Angelou, M. (1969). *I know why the caged bird sings*. Random House.
2. Angelou, M. (1995). *Phenomenal woman*. Random House.
3. Beauvoir, S. de. (1989). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
4. hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.
5. Jaggar, A. M. (1983). *Feminist politics and human nature*. Rowman & Allanheld.
6. MacKinnon, C. A. (1983). Feminism, Marxism, method, and the state. *Signs*, 8(4), 635–658.
7. Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30, 61–88.
8. Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Okin, S. M. (1979). *Women in Western political thought*. Princeton University Press.
10. Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A vindication of the rights of woman*.