Feminist Historiography of Women, Slavery, and Social Change

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Scope of Feminist Historiography

Feminism, just like any other social phenomenon, has been a subject of discussion for many years. Its history and progress have been recorded by various historians and social commentators over time. What has stood out has been the differences in the accounts given by various historians—differences that arose as a result of such things as the prevailing conditions at the time of writing and differences in the times of writing, among other issues. The aim of this paper is to study the differences in the approaches given by some historians in regard to feminism, paying special and close attention to such feminist warriors as Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony and their contribution to pushing the agenda for emancipation and human rights.

By definition, feminism refers to all the political and social movements and ideologies that aim at defining, establishing and achieving political, personal, social and economic equality of all genders, paying more attention to educating and empowering women in such a way that they are men's equal. As such, the movements advocate for the rights of women, key among the rights being the right to vote, work, earn fair wages and salaries, and own property, among other rights. They also seek to protect women from such things as domestic violence, rape and any other abuse against them. As mentioned, various feminists have stood for the rights of women, and the way in which their histories have been recorded differs from one historian to another.

Historiographical Accounts of Susan B Anthony

One such feminist is Susan B Anthony, whose history has been recorded by various historians, among them James W Davidson and Yohuru Williams. Born in 1820, Susan rose to be one of the most iconic women in championing women's empowerment and rights. She is remembered particularly for the fact that, at the young age of seventeen, she gathered several anti-slavery petitions, something that showed her resentment towards slavery. Together with Elizabeth Stanton, who had turned out to be her long-time friend and fellow worker in the push for social reforms, she established the New York Women's State Temperance Society after she was denied the opportunity to speak at some temperance conference earlier on, for the reason that she was a woman.

A major difference between the aforementioned accounts resulted from the time gap between the two historians. In his accounts, Davidson records the day-to-day accounts of what Susan did, given that they lived at almost the same time, both living at the end of the 19th century. Meanwhile, Williams lives in the 21st century and has contributed to Susan's history in his book, *Teaching U.S History Beyond the Textbook*. Therefore, the major differences between their historical literature come from the fact that while Davidson relied mostly on first-hand information that he sometimes witnessed, Williams mostly referred to the past written records of his predecessors.

Another difference between the accounts is that while Davidson was an explorer and historian with no interest in activism, Williams is not only a writer and academic but also an activist. As such, their literature is affected by their sentiments towards the characters they are discussing. It is, for instance, worth noting that the only reason Williams would mention Susan is for reasons associated with activism, leaving out her other life activities. Davidson, on the other hand, would seek to demystify Susan's life even on matters unrelated to her activism, as can be found in his book *A History of the Republic; the United States, volume 1.*

Historiographical Accounts of Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was another feminist whose history has been recorded by a number of historians. Born Isabella Belle Baumfree, she changed her name to Sojourner Truth as a result of a conviction that God had prepared and commissioned her to leave the town in which she was living for the upcountry to spread the hope that she had. Having been born and grown in absolute slavery, she was subjected to slavery until her teenage years. However, in 1826, she managed to run away from slavery with her young daughter. Two years later, she was charged with unlawfully attempting to escape with her son from her slave home. She is credited with being the first woman to win a case against a white man and, therefore, retained the son.

Among the historians who sought to write about Sojourner were Nell Irvin Painter, who wrote about Sojourner in her book *Sojourner Truth: A Life a Symbol,* and Whallin W. Terry in his book *Sojourner Truth.* Just like their fellow historians, the two had their differences in approaching the history of the subjects in discussion, the main difference being their attitude towards feminism and women empowerment in general.

Terry, in his book, wrote about Sojourner without any specific attitude towards feminism. This has largely been because he is not alienated from either side of supporting or objecting to feminism. On the other hand, Painter, being a Black feminist champion, has had an attitude towards her discussion about Truth. What, however, makes them close to similar is that both have been subjected to referencing past books for information about their subjects and, therefore, their records are subject to debate in terms of credibility.

Historiographical Accounts of Lucretia Mott

Born in 1793, Lucretia Mott was an American abolitionist, social reformer, and women's rights advocate. She is famous mostly because she was one of the women who wrote the Declaration of Sentiments. Her activism arose after she, together with some other women, was denied a chance to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention. She is also remembered for having campaigned that all those who had been bound to be slaves in the United States be allowed the right to vote immediately after slavery was abolished in the country, something that made her a public subject for quite a long time.

Like many other public figures in history, her story was written by a number of historians; among those who set out to write about her included but were not limited to Margret Hope Bacon in her book *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* and Otelia Cromwell in her book *Lucretia Mott (United Nations, 1979). What stands out is that these writers, having studied the histories of their subject from other sources, seemed to be in agreement from a larger angle and had almost converging ideas of the character.*

Historiographical Accounts of Angelina and Sarah Grimke

Angelina and Sarah Grimke are well-known figures in abolitionist warfare and the fight for social reforms, especially in regard to female empowerment and emancipation. Sarah, the elder sister, was born in 1792 and was a member of the women's suffrage movement, a writer and abolitionist. They are credited with having been the very first women to have expressly spoken at abolitionist lecture circuits, following the steps of their predecessors such as Susanna Wright and Susan B. Anthony. Her motivation to speak about women's empowerment largely resulted from the bias she witnessed at home. Her brothers were taken to school for classical education, while she remained at home taking informal classes. This was despite the fact that her intelligence was a well-recognized fact but was overlooked as a result of her dreams being considered unwomanly. She had desired to pursue a dream to become an attorney. Though her father was rich financially, he did not find it worthwhile to educate Sarah and her sister. This, therefore, pushed the two sisters to speak out against prejudice against women.

Their history has been documented by a number of historians, among them David C Downing in his book *A South Divided: Portrait of Dissent in the Confederacy* and Pamela R. Durso in her book *The Power of a Woman: The Life and Writings of Sarah Moore Grimke.*

Pamela R. Durso, being a Christian evangelist, had her attitude towards the Grimkes shaped and, therefore, differed greatly from that of her counterpart, Mr. Downing. In her account, for instance, she puts more emphasis on her ability to interpret the Bible in such a way that it did not make men

superior to women. She argues that the Grimkes worked successfully to reduce male dominance that had arisen out of men thinking that the Bible made them higher than women, something she calls a patriarchal interpretation of the Bible. This is unlike her counterpart, Downing, whose description of the Grimkes is impartial and unbiased based on religion. His views are more neutral, and any bias, if any, has not been influenced in any way by religion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that though historians are speaking of similar major figures in history, the influence of such things as the time of writing, profession and personal sentiments can dictate how a writer will speak of that figure. As can be noted from the aforementioned examples, it is therefore safe to say that it is prudent to widen the spectrum when studying the people who made the history we have today, lest bias mislead us.

References

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