

From The Woman Suffrage Theorist Feminism's Shift from Moderate to Radical

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Abstract

Feminism (also known as feminism), with the main connotation of 'women's demand for full rights as human beings', first appeared in modern Europe, and then took liberalism's theory of 'freedom and equality' as the starting point, and interpreted the ideas of women's rights and gender equality, forming the liberal feminist thought. Later, the liberal theory of 'freedom and equality' was used as the starting point to explain the ideas of women's rights and gender equality, forming the liberal feminist ideology. On this basis, the modern feminist movement emerged, with the main goal of fighting for political participation and the right to vote. Through analysing, interpreting and researching the film *The Woman Suffrage Theorist*, this paper explores the historical process of the gradual transformation of the women's suffrage campaigners in Britain from a moderate way of struggle to a radical way of struggle at the beginning of the twentieth century, from the storytelling restoration of the historical events of the early twentieth century when women in Britain fought relentlessly for women's right to vote. By analysing factors such as the social background of the time, the development of the women's suffrage movement, important events and key figures, the deep-seated reasons for this transformation and its far-reaching impact on society are revealed.

Keywords

The Woman Suffrage Theorist, feminism, moderate, radical, historical process.

1. The Social Background of The Woman Suffrage Theorist

The stage of modern feminist movement mainly appeared in Britain, which was the earliest to carry out the industrial revolution and was deeply influenced by liberal thinking. In the first half of the 19th century, the bourgeois democratic reforms further realised the liberal principles in the national politics, from which women gained sufficient knowledge of the constitution and strengthened the consciousness of freedom and equality, and they attempted to take the parliamentary reforms as an opportunity to realise the equal rights of women. As a result, in the parliamentary reforms of 1867 and 1884, they set in motion the women's suffrage movement, and in the 1884 reforms, in order to make it acceptable to the majority of the members of Parliament, the women presented to the members of Parliament a very limited suffrage bill, according to which only more than 100,000 women, mostly wealthy property owners, would be able to obtain the right to vote. As a result, not only did the bill fail to gain support in Parliament, but as a result it lost many supporters among women, and women's suffrage was never realised in the 19th century. [1,2]

After women's suffrage was denied time and time again, some radical women's organisations began to unite with the workers and set their sights on seeking public support. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, suffragettes began to abandon peaceful protests in favour of radical tactics, including broken windows and arson, in order to gain support for the right to vote. The struggle for equal suffrage escalated in the violence of 1912

and 1913, and it is the women's movement of this period that is depicted in the film *The Woman Suffrage Theorist*, which has many vivid descriptions and presentations. Based on historical events, the film presents the history of women's struggles and expresses women's worldview through the re-creation of historical figures supplemented by fictional characters.

As a product of social progress, modern feminist thought is rooted in the criticism of traditional patriarchal society, absorbing and developing modern bourgeois ideology, and pioneering the idea of making women independent 'human beings'. The feminist movement of the 19th century, which emerged on this basis, challenged the unequal relationship between the sexes to a certain extent, changed the traditional status of women, and dealt a great blow to modern social and political traditions, thus laying the foundation for the realisation of women's right to political equality in the 20th century. The moderate approach and the radical approach have different footholds and social causes, and analysing the film *The Woman Suffrage Theorist* as a starting point will help us to better understand the connection and difference between the two, as well as help us to analyse the trend of the current feminist movement from a historical perspective.

2. Transformation from a moderate to a radical approach

2.1. Moderate phase of the women's suffrage movement

Since the end of the 19th century, the women's suffrage movement in Britain has gradually emerged. With the development of the Industrial Revolution, the social structure of Britain underwent great changes, and women gradually gained certain status and rights in the fields of economy, culture and education. However, in the political field, women were still powerless. In order to fight for the right to vote, British women began to organise themselves for the suffrage movement. At first, women mainly adopted peaceful and rational ways to fight for the right to vote, such as petitioning, writing books, distributing pamphlets and making speeches to express their demands to the government and all walks of life. In addition, they took an active part in elections and parliamentary debates everywhere, lobbying and asking for support from male politicians. Objectively speaking, these moderate ways of struggle were supported and recognised to a certain extent in the historical conditions at the beginning. For example, Watts, the protagonist of *The Woman Suffrage Theorist*, also initially views the women's suffrage movement with a moderate or even wait-and-see attitude. At the beginning of the film, when she first sees women smashing windows with glass on the street, her instinctive reaction is to think that the women fighting for their rights are acting too aggressively.

However, as the movement progresses, the government's growing indifference to and repression of the women's suffrage movement prompts some of them to turn to more radical forms of struggle. The most ironic scene in the film is when the parliamentary delegation asks Watts what suffrage meant to her, and Watts freezes for a few seconds before replying blankly, 'I never thought we'd get the right to vote, and therefore I never thought it would mean anything', to which the men burst out laughing. The most ironic but not the most shocking scene, the ensuing series of events has led more and more conscious women to embark on the path of courageous resistance, from silent suffering to action resistance, from gentle appeal to violent self-destruction, and on the path of radical affirmative action.

2.2. Important events and key figures

A number of key figures and events played an important role in the transformation of the women's suffrage activists from moderate to radical. For example, Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the radical leaders of the women's suffrage movement, organised and led many demonstrations and protests. Her strong stand and courage inspired more and more women to join the suffragette movement. Emmeline Pankhurst and her eldest daughter, Cristabel, founded the

famous women's suffrage organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union of Great Britain (WSPUGB), in 1903, with the slogan 'Deeds, not Words'. The motto of the organisation was 'Deeds, not Words'.) Between 1905 and 1914, the League launched an unprecedented campaign for suffrage in order to put pressure on the government to achieve its goal of gaining the right to vote in Parliament. It ranged from disrupting politicians' rallies and organising demonstrations to smashing windows, arson and bombings, with hunger strikes and even members killing themselves under the hooves of royal horses. The movement's behaviour escalated from the early unsuccessful attempts at moderation to radical violence, which shook the UK and the world. The Pankhurst family and this radical women's suffrage movement remain in the public memory of Europe and the United States to this day, and because of their uniqueness and the richness of their historical significance, they occupy an important position in the history of women's suffrage. [3] Although the character of Emmeline Pankhurst appears in the film for only a few minutes, her powerful speeches became the guiding light for the feminist activists in the film.

In addition, a number of important historical events accelerated the transformation of the suffragette movement into a radical form of struggle. For example, the failure of the government to honour its promises to women after the First World War led to a loss of faith in peaceful methods of struggle, while the conviction of Rosa Luxemburg for 'treason' under German state law further fuelled the spirit of women's resistance.

2.3. The radicalisation of the suffragette movement and its analysis

One of the most powerful scenes in the film *The Woman Suffrage Theorist* is Davidson's final 'military action' at the June 1913 Epsom Races. Emily Wilding. Emily Wilding. Emily Wilding Davison was a real person whose actions ultimately had a significant impact on the women's suffrage movement. As an active advocate for women's rights, Davison fought for equal suffrage for women through actions and protests. She was constantly involved in demonstrations and marches and personally experienced several arrests and imprisonments. Davidson was incarcerated nine times for her militant behaviour and force-fed 49 times during her incarceration (many suffragettes were force-fed when they began their hunger strikes in prison, as shown in the scenes dedicated to the film. Davidson once wrote in an article that these feedings were a 'terrible ordeal'). She even sacrificed her own freedom and life to fight for women's suffrage. At a horse race, she ran towards the king's royal horse and was trampled to the ground moments later; Davidson died a few days later. Her death was a huge turning point for feminists; 6,000 women attended the funeral, and the film features archival footage of women trailing behind Davidson's coffin. In Britain, women and men were finally given equal voting rights in 1928.

In terms of social context, British society faced many challenges and changes as it entered the 20th century. On the one hand, the outbreak of World War I plunged the country into turmoil; on the other hand, women's active participation and contribution in the war further enhanced their social status and political awareness. However, the government failed to respond to women's demands in a timely manner and instead suppressed and repressed the women's political participation movement. This change in the social context provided an opportunity for the women's suffrage activists to turn to a more radical form of struggle. Under the government's repression and suppression, some of the women's suffrage activists began to turn to more radical forms of struggle. They resorted to public rallies, speeches, peaceful demonstrations and marches to fight for the right to vote. In addition, they resorted to extreme means to arouse the attention and sympathy of society, such as vandalism, arson and suicide. These radical ways of struggle aroused widespread controversy and discussion at the time. From a theoretical point of view, Engels had pointed out that sometimes, beyond the objective material conditions, premature and radical revolutions could not bring about emancipation; on

the contrary, they would hinder the process of social and historical development and have the opposite effect of slowing down the cause of emancipation. He criticised the revolutionary conspirators who wanted to go beyond the revolutionary process and pointed out that there should be intermediate stops and compromises caused by historical development, always aiming clearly at and pursuing the final goal. Human social development is a natural historical process; it is a stage of development that can neither be skipped nor cancelled by decree. [4] Mao Zedong also pointed out in his 1927 Report on the Expedition to the Peasant Movement in Hunan that 'Revolution is not a dinner invitation, not an essay, not a painting and embroidery, it cannot be that elegant, that unhurried, that refined, that gentle and courteous. A revolution is an insurrection, a violent action in which one class overthrows another. A rural revolution is a revolution in which the peasant class overthrows the power of the feudal landlord class. The peasants can never overthrow the power of the landlords, which has been deeply rooted for thousands of years, without great strength. There must be a great revolutionary fervour in the countryside in order to mobilise the masses in their thousands and form a great force.' These discourses are sufficient to show that moderate means and radical methods are not entirely isolated or opposed to each other, and that while a moderate form of revolution may not always produce substantial results, it is an indispensable process for the advancement of the subsequent movement, and that there will be no subsequent series of protests arising from disappointment. Thus, more than radicalism and violence, the ultimate success of the suffragette movement was due to the fact that its activities were largely in line with the advantages offered by the objective conditions.

2.4. Impact of the radical approach of the women's suffrage movement

In terms of social impact, the radical approach to struggle adopted by the women's suffrage movement has aroused widespread concern and discussion in society. On the one hand, their struggles were supported and sympathised by some people; on the other hand, they were opposed and condemned by some people. However, no matter what, these radical methods of struggle made the women's suffrage movement a hot topic in the society at that time, and aroused people's concern and thinking about the issue of women's rights and status. In terms of political influence, the radicalisation of the suffragettes had a far-reaching impact on British politics. On the one hand, their struggle forced the government to take a square look at the issue of women's participation in politics and gradually take measures to guarantee women's right to vote; on the other hand, their struggle also promoted the reform and progress of the British political system, making British politics more democratic and open. The relevant ideas have also been echoed to a certain extent by the governments of European and American capitalist countries. Since the beginning of the 20th century, women in the West have gained equal political rights under the law: Finnish women were the first to gain the right to vote in 1906; American women gained the right to vote in 1920; British women gained the right to vote in 1928; and French women, who were the first to raise their voices in feminism in 1944, finally gained the right to vote after 155 years of the founding of the country.

3. Conclusion

The transformation of women's suffrage activists in Britain from moderate to radical in the early twentieth century was a complex and tortuous process. This transformation was due to both changes in the social context and the awakening and struggle of women's suffrage activists themselves. In any case, it had a profound impact on the development of the British women's suffrage movement and the reform and progress of the British political system. In today's society, we can still draw valuable experience and inspiration from this historical process to provide useful reference for the fight for women's rights and status.

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