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## Feminist Literary Criticism

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### Abstract

Feminist Literary Criticism is the rebellion of the female consciousness against the male images of female identity and experience. The concept of female identity shows us how female experience is transformed into female consciousness, often in reaction to male paradigms for female experience. It is an ideology that opposes the political, economical and cultural relegation of women to positions of inferiority. The critical project of Feminist critics is thus concerned with "uncovering the contingencies of gender" as a cultural, social and political construct and instrument of domination. This paper offers a comprehensive guide to the history and development of Feminist Literary Criticism and a lively assessment of the main issues and authors in the field.

**Key Words:** Feminist Literary Criticism, consciousness, oppression.

### Three Waves of Feminist Literary Criticism

The concept of Feminist Literary Criticism came out as one of the crucial developments in literary studies. The term *Feminism* is derived from French term "feminist" which was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Its studies have been broad and varied from the mid-19th century until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

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There are three waves of Feminist Literary Criticism, which are described as “Waves Model”:

**"First Wave" feminism:** In the 1830s, the main issues were abolition of slavery and women's rights. 1848 – Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, NY. 1920 – the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed women the right to vote.

**"Second Wave" feminism:** Feminism waned between the two world wars, to be "revived" in the late 1960's and early 1970's as "Second Wave" feminism. In this second wave, feminists pushed beyond the early quest for political rights to fight for greater equality across the board, e.g., in education, the workplace, and at home.

**"Third Wave" feminism:** More recent transformations of feminism have resulted in a "Third Wave". It began in the early 1990s. Third Wave feminists often criticize Second Wave feminism for its lack of attention to the differences among men and women due to race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and emphasize "identity" as a site of gender struggle.

### **Intentions of Feminist Criticism**

The main **intentions of feminist criticism** are:

- To unfold and widen the female tradition of writing
- To interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view
- To help women's writings retain or gain a significant place even in the world of men
- To consider female writer and their writings from the perspective of a women
- To prevent sexism in literary texts
- To augment alertness regarding sexual politics of language and its approach

### **International Women's Liberation Movement**

Feminist literary criticism started as part of the international women's liberation movement. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan sparked a national debate about women's roles. According to *The New York Times* obituary of Friedan in 2006, it “ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world” and “is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20th century”[14]. In the book, Friedan defines women's unhappiness as “the problem that has no name,” She pins the blame on an idealized image of femininity that she calls the feminine mystique.

## **Friedan's Focus**

According to Friedan, women have been encouraged to confine themselves to the narrow roles of housewife and mother, forsaking education and career aspirations in the process. Betty Friedan attempted to demystify this false feminine mystique, which she described as "a world confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children and home" in order to renew the women's fight for equal rights.[1]

"The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own. There is no other way." [15]

## **Kate Miller**

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) laid the foundation for subsequent feminist scholarship by showing how cultural discourse reflects a systematized subjugation and exploitation of women. Millet also introduces some of the fundamental terms, such as "patriarchal," which gained considerable significance in feminist literary studies. According to Millet "patriarchal" is a term where male-dominated structures and social arrangements elaborate the oppression of women. By definition it also exhibits androcentrism, meaning male centered. "Sexual Politics" soon became a cult book among feminist critics, especially with its politics of female representations in literature.

## **Elaine Showalter: Feminine, Feminist and Female**

Elaine Showalter, an American literary critic, feminist, and writer on cultural and social issues, is one of the founders of feminist literary criticism in United States academia, developing the concept and practice of gynocritics.[4] Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics' to describe literary criticism based in a feminine perspective. Her *A Literature of Their Own* is a typical example.

In her analysis of the historical development, Showalter presents three important stages of women's writing. First, the imitation of the mainstream literary tradition: second, the protest against the standards of this dominant tradition concerning social values and rights: and third, self-discovery which aims at a search for identity. Showalter identifies these stages as Feminine, Feminist and Female[3]. The Feminine period covers the years between 1840-1889; the Feminist period 1890-1920, and the Female period starts in 1920 and comes to the 1960s. It continues with its renewal of perspectives with the advent of the women's movement after the 1960s. Showalter's contribution to the feminist criticism centres on her rediscovery of the forgotten women writers falling into these stages.

Feminists' mission is to end all forms of exploitation & injustice against the women. They have a moral obligation to combat against tyranny and subjugation. In order to accomplish feminism's objectives it may be inevitable to oppose religion and economic

exploitation, but not intrinsic. Their goal is only to oppose oppression, exploitation and injustice. Feminists advocate social, political & economical rights for women equal to men.

### **Bell Hooks: Sexism**

Bell Hooks argues:

“Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice.” [6]

Hooks' approach describes that sexism is a particular form of oppression. Though there are also some other forms of oppression, e.g., racism and homophobia. These forms of oppression require too much efforts to dismantle like as sexism but feminists' objective is to end only sexism against this view that women are subject to sexist oppression and that this is wrong.

### **Mary Wollstonecraft: The Rights of Woman**

The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on over two hundred years of feminist enquiry cannot be overstated, who eloquently anticipated the concerns of second-wave feminism. At the heart of Wollstonecraft's work is an attack on the authority of Edmund Burke, John Milton and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'fellow authors of a fictitious femininity, and patriarchal enemies in league against female emancipation' in which Wollstonecraft exposed Burke's sentimental 'aestheticisation of beauty', Rousseau's construction of an ideal, objectified woman, and the flawed misogynistic construction of Milton's Eve. In her detailed readings of these texts, Wollstonecraft reveals herself adept at the deployment of what would later be termed feminist critique. But this is not the limit of her achievement. [9,10,12]

Most notably in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that well-educated women will be good wives and mothers and ultimately contribute positively to the nation. Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society and then proceeds to redefine that position, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate their children and because they could be "companions" to their husbands rather than mere wives. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men. Large sections of the *Rights of Woman* respond vitriolically to conduct book writers such

as James Fordyce and John Gregory and educational philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wanted to deny women an education. (Rousseau famously argues in Émile (1762) that women should be educated for the pleasure of men.)[7, 8]

### **Virginia Woolf: Founder of Modern Feminist Literary Criticism**

Virginia Woolf is seen to be ‘the founder of modern feminist literary criticism’ (Goldman, 66). As Jane Goldman demonstrates, Woolf’s groundbreaking essay *A Room of One’s Own* constitutes a ‘modern primer’ for feminist criticism, and her influence on later generations of feminist thought has been immense [11].

Woolf matters to feminist literary criticism not simply as a writer and critic, but also as a subject of critical enquiry. The rescuing of Woolf from the apolitical prisons of Bloomsbury and madness was one of the formative projects of second-wave feminist literary criticism, giving rise to a constructive relationship between the writer, her criticism and her critics.

It is Woolf we must thank for the provocative concepts of thinking back through our mothers, the woman’s sentence and the androgynous mind. It is Woolf who wrote of killing the angel in the house and demanded the adaptation of the book to the body. Goldman’s chapter illustrates how, in Woolf’s creative contradictions and her disruptive boundary-crossing imagination, we find sources for the many, often conflicting, theoretical positions of contemporary feminist thought.

### **Beauvoir: A Rich Lexicon of Images and Ideas**

Like Woolf, **Beauvoir** has left feminism with a rich lexicon of images and ideas, not least of which is her definitive assertion that ‘one is not born a woman’. This concept is implicit in the work and debates surrounding all our protofeminists and pioneers, but in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* this fundamental idea receives explicit articulation.

As discussed above, the recognition of the social construction of gender and the coercive nature of gendered subjectivities has been at the centre of feminist literary criticism, enabling it as a discourse to challenge humanist assumptions about identity, nature and progress, and to scrutinize the potent mythical formations of femininity and masculinity [2].

From Kate Millett to Judith Butler, feminist critics have been inspired by Beauvoir, but, as Elizabeth Fallaize argues, the full substance of her monumental work is hardly known. Since the 1990s, a new generation of feminist literary critics have been working to revise the limited perceptions of Beauvoir’s work, and Fallaize contributes to this vital process through a study of Beauvoir’s analysis of myth.

Myth, claimed Beauvoir, was instrumental in ‘persuading women of the *naturalness* of their fate’, and Fallaize traces her examination of feminine archetypes from Stendhal to Sade, in the process finding an ecumenical methodology that anticipates later literary-critical movements from Marxism to structuralism to psychoanalysis. *The Second Sex* prefaces the point at which *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* more obviously begins and, as with Wollstonecraft and Woolf, the echoes of Beauvoir’s influence will resonate throughout its pages.

### **Social Construction of Gender**

‘Feminism’ is an umbrella term for range of views about injustices against women. There are some disagreements also among feminists about the nature of justice in general and the nature of sexism, in particular, the specific kinds of injustice or wrong women suffer; and the group who should be the primary focus of feminist efforts. But all the feminists agreed that there is some sense of "rights" on which achieving equal rights for women is a necessary condition for feminism to succeed. As Kolodny also points out, there is a basic principle that unites feminist literary critics under one roof despite their plurality of methods:

“What unites and repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism... is neither dogma nor method but an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance: the consequences of that encoding for women - as characters, as readers, and as writers; and, with that, a shared analytic concern for the implications of that encoding not only for a better understanding of the past but also for an improved reordering of the present and future” [5, 13].

### **Conclusion**

The field of feminism is undoubtedly very vast as it is committed to bring about social change to end injustice against women, in particular, injustice against women as women. Feminist literary criticism has been very successful especially in reclaiming the lost literary women and in documenting the sources. In this respect, feminist criticism has successfully directed attention to the female intellectual tradition. To conclude If feminist criticism really wants to generate new analytical methods in its readings of literary texts, it can only achieve its aim by challenging and disrupting the patriarchal tradition within its dominant discourses, that is, by working from within that tradition.

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