

Feminist Narratology: An Overview

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Abstract

Feminist narratology came to surface from within the concept of narratology, owing to the limitations in narratology. It is aptly said that the history of narrative is as old as the history of humankind. However narrative or so to say narratology often neglected the implications of gender; which brought unrest amongst feminist literary circles. This paper aims at discussing the etymology of the concept along with throwing light on the limitations of the concept of narratology which led to its emergence.

Keywords: Feminist narratology, Narratology, feminist, gender.

Terms Used

Feminist Narratology: refers to the study of narratives from a feminist perspective, taking into account the impact of gender on narrative patterns.

Narratology: refers to the study of narratives in terms of its structure and function.

Feminist: is a person who supports equal rights for women in all walks of life. It is a stance which is pro women but not anti-men.

Gender: is a social construct that relegates certain way of life and obligations to the members of specific sex. For instance, women are expected to be compliant and yielding whereas men are supposed to be assertive and dominating.

The paper provides an overview of the concept of feminist narratology. This concept originated amongst seminal debates on the shortcomings of the concept of narratology. The term was coined with the emergence of Susan S. Lanser's groundbreaking paper, "Toward A Feminist

Narratology” (1986) in which she charged the concept of narratology of almost completely ignoring the question of gender.

Feminist narratology is an amalgamation of two different concepts namely feminism and narratology into one single methodology. It is a widely accepted fact that, feminism is “impressionistic, evaluative, and political” (Lanser 341), however, narratology is “scientific, descriptive, and non-ideological” (Lanser 341). The merging together of these two divergent concepts into one collaborative approach is like forcing “an intersection of two lines drawn on different planes” (Lanser 341).

Tzvetan Todorov coined the term Narratology (*narratologie*) which first appeared in his work *Grammaire du Decameron* published in the year 1969. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines narrative as, “a way of understanding or presenting a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values” (1 b). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* provides the definition of narratology as:

It deals especially with the type of narrators, the identification of structural elements and their diverse modes of combination, recurrent narrative devices, and the analysis of the kinds of discourse by which a narrative gets told, as well as with the narratee—that is, the explicit or implied person or audience to whom the narrator addresses the narrative. (Abrams 173)

Barbara Hardy emphasizes that in a way we all are narrators and storytellers when she embarks that, “we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative” (5).

Lanser asserts that, “narratology has had little impact on feminist scholarship, and feminist insights about narrative have been similarly overlooked by narratology” (341)

She states that the texts that have formed the basis of narratology are either men’s texts or texts that are considered men’s text. She affirms this viewpoint by quoting:

Genette’s formulation of a “Discours du recit” on the basis of Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, Propp’s androcentric morphology of a certain kind of folktale, Greimas on Maupassant, Iser on male novelists from Bunyan to Beckett, Barthes on Balzac, Todorov on the *Decameron*—these are but evident examples of the ways in which the masculine text stands for the universal text. (343)

The above stated quote confirms the fact that masculine is what was considered universal

and taking refuge of the same theorists formulated the concept of narratology wherein women's texts were not considered for formulating the basis of narratology. Lanser emphasizes on rewriting narratology as she blatantly exclaims, "a narratology that cannot adequately account for women's narrative is an inadequate narratology for men's texts as well" (346). Lauretis exclaims that in addition to claim for universality, male texts have misrepresented women in literature to the extent that they have been relegated them to a sub human status. Feminist critics emphasize that narratology must be reframed where women writers and women's writings should be given due weightage.

Furman states that "literature is at the juncture of two systems" (64). First juncture being the standpoint that it accounts to reality as it imitates life and the second viewpoint that it is "an enunciation supposing a narrator and a listener" and "primarily a linguistic construct" (64-65).

To feminist critics characters are of utmost concern and they "speak of characters largely as if they were persons" (Lanser 344), however structuralist narratologists treat characters as "patterns of recurrence" to a position where they "lose their privilege, their central status, and their definition" (Weinsheimer 195).

I would like to conclude this paper stating following lines by Lanser:

The challenge to both feminism and narratology is to recognize the dual nature of narrative, to find categories and terms that are abstract and semiotic enough to be useful, but concrete and mimetic enough to seem relevant for critics whose theories root literature in "the real conditions of our lives". (344)

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