

Feminist Literary Criticism

What is Feminism?

The term 'feminism' has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term 'feminism' to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there is a list of injustices against women; although this list is unspecified. Feminism came first as a reaction to patriarchy as a doctrine in the western societies. Patriarchy as "a social system based on sexual hierarchy" puts men at the top and women below; Feminism as an ideology "opposes the political, economic and cultural relegation of women to positions of inferiority". Simply put, Feminism affirms women's equality with men, and rejects patriarchy.

Historical background of Feminism

When we try to look at the history of Feminism, we face the problematic of based on which perspective we are going to approach its history? Is it from a political eye focusing on white women's contribution to Feminism in Europe and U.S.A? Or from a more universalistic eye regarding "the ongoing resistance to male domination between the 1920's and 1960's and the resistance outside mainstream politics, particularly by women of color and working class women." (Cott 1987) Therefore, I opt to deal with the issue from a historical perspective giving much importance to those women who in a way or another gave birth to Feminism.

Waves of Feminism

First wave Feminism in U.K and U.S.A: 19th and early 20th century

The first wave was more focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women, the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. By the end of the 19th century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power meaning the right of women's suffrage. Feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were still active in compaining for women's sexual, reproductive and economic rights. In Britain, in 1918 the Representation of the People act was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30, who owned houses. In 1928, this was extended to all women over 21. American first-wave Feminism involved a wide range of women. One of them is Frances Willard, who belonged to the conservative Christian groups such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)

Apart from her novels, Virginia Woolf also wrote two works which contributed to feminist theory: *A Room with a View* (1927), and *Three Guineas* (1938). In the former, Woolf considered especially the social situation of women as writers and, in the latter, she explored the dominance of the major professions by men. In the first work she argued that women's writing should

explore female experience and not just draw comparisons with the situation in society of men. Woolf was also one of the earliest writers to stress that gender is not predetermined but is a social construct and, as such, can be changed. However, she did not want to encourage a direct confrontation between female and male concerns and preferred to try to find some kind of balance of power between the two. If women were to develop their artistic abilities to the full, she felt it was necessary to establish social and economic equality with men.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)

Simone de Beauvoir is famous not only as a feminist but as the life-long partner of the French philosopher Jean- Paul Sartre. She was a very active fighter for women's rights and a supporter of abortion. Her most influential book is, without doubt, *The Second Sex* (1949). In this work, she outlined the differences between the interests of men and women and attacked various forms of male dominance over women. Already in the Bible and throughout history Woman was always regarded as the 'Other'. Man dominated in all influential cultural fields, including law, religion, philosophy, science, literature and the other arts. She also clearly distinguished between 'sex' and 'gender', and wrote (famously) 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' She demanded freedom for women from being distinguished on the basis of biology and rejected the whole notion of femininity, which she regarded as a male projection.

Second wave Feminism: 1960s to 1980s

The scholar Imelda Whelehan suggests that the second wave was a continuation of the earlier phase involving the right of suffrage in the U.K and U.S.A. The first wave focused on rights, whereas the second was largely concerned with other issues of equality such as: ending discrimination in so many fields. It was a phase where the fighting against social and cultural as well as political inequalities started. This resulted in the coining of the phrase "Women's liberation"; this phrase was first used in the U.S.A in 1964 and first appeared in print in 1966 (the magazine *Ramparts*). At the same time, in America, the American post-war economic boom had led to the development of new technologies that were supposed to make household work less difficult. But, this had the result of making women's work less meaningful and valueless.

Kate Millett (1934–)

Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* (1969) was probably the most influential feminist work of its period. Her central argument is that the main cause of the oppression of women is ideology. Patriarchy is all-pervasive and treats females universally as inferior. In both public and private life the female is subordinate. Millett also distinguishes very clearly between 'sex' (biological characteristics) and 'gender' (culturally acquired identity). The interaction of domination and subordination in all relations between men and women is what she calls 'sexual politics'. Millett also reveals a special interest in literature, arguing that the very structure of narrative has been shaped by male ideology. Male purposiveness and goal-seeking dominate the structure of most literature. To show up the extent to

which the perspectives in most works are those of the men, she deliberately provides readings of famous works of literature from a woman's perspective. However, she reveals a misconceived

view of homosexuality in literature (especially in the works of Jean Genet), which she could only comprehend as a kind of metaphor for subjection of the female.

Julia Kristeva (1941–)

The central ideas of Julia Kristeva have already been outlined in relation to the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on her work. She considered Lacan's 'symbolic' stage in a child's development to be the main root of male dominance. When a child learns language, it also recognizes principles of order, law and rationality associated with a patriarchal society. Lacan's pre-Oedipal 'imaginary' stage is referred to by Kristeva as 'semiotic', and literature, especially poetry, can tap the rhythms and drives of this stage. The pre-Oedipal stage is also associated very closely with the body of the mother. When the male child enters the 'symbolic' order, however, the child identifies with the father. The female child is identified with pre-Oedipal, pre-discursive incoherence, and is seen as a threat to the rational order. As has been already explained, Kristeva advocates a kind of anarchic liberation, in which 'poetic' and 'political' become interchangeable

Third wave Feminism: Early 1990s

Arose as a response to perceived failures of the second wave and also a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave, third wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle class women.

Ruth Robbins

The general concern of Marxist Feminism is to reveal the double oppression of women, both by the capitalist system and by sexuality within the home, and to explain the relationships between the two. The ideas of Ruth Robbins provide a good example of the combination of feminist concerns and Marxist principles. In *Literary Feminisms* (2000), she advocates a Marxist feminism which explains 'the material conditions of real people's lives, how conditions such as poverty and undereducation produce different signifying systems than works produced in conditions of privilege and educational plenty'.

Types of Feminism

Liberal Feminism

Liberal Feminism has mottos like "there can be no free men until there are free women", "A man of equality is not threatened by a woman for equality" that's why it shared with Liberalism these ideas:

Human equality.

Human rationality.

Importance of individual rights.

Radical Feminism

Radical Feminism appeared as a direct reaction to liberal Feminism. Multiple radical feminisms came to life and all share a critique of Liberalist Feminism for accepting the status quo socially and economically. In accordance to that, we have radical feminisms like:

Socialist Feminism: It argues that patriarchy and capitalism are linked; both are exploiting the female gender.

Lesbian Feminism: It criticizes the society's definition of heterosexuality as normal and all other sexualities as deviant

Anti-pornography Feminism: It argues that pornography fosters violence against women. Whereas, Liberal Feminism emphasizes the 1st amendment of free speech rights.

Diversity Feminism

Diversity Feminism focuses on the needs and perspectives of non-Anglo, non-Western and non-affluent women who must be taken into consideration. It contradicts with Liberal Feminism which ignores the different perspectives and neglects the fact that women's issue change across cultures and across time; no single Feminist voice or point of view.

Pioneers of Feminism

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Simone de Beauvoir denies that gender differences are based on biology, insisting that "one is not born, but becomes a woman". In her work *The second Sex*, Simone gives a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational track of contemporary feminism. Written in 1949, its English translation was published in 1953. It sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. Moreover, the author argues that women have been historically considered deviant and abnormal and contends that even Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) considered men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire.

Betty Friedan (1921-2006)

Betty Friedan identified ways in which traditional feminine gender roles stifle women's development and emphasized sexism as inherently dehumanizing. In 1963, she wrote *The Feminine Mystique* criticizing the idea that women could only find fulfillment through child bearing and home-making. She hypothesizes that women are victims of a false belief system that requires them to find identity and meaning in their lives through their husbands and children. Such a system causes women to lose their own identity in that of their family.

Judith Butler (1956)

In her most influential book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argued that feminism has made a mistake by trying to assert that 'women' were a group with common characteristics and interests. That approach, Butler said, performed "an unwilling regulation and reification of gender relations". Reinforcing the binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear-cut groups, women and men. Rather than opening up possibilities for a person to form and choose their own individual identity, therefore feminism had closed the options down.

Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist literary theory is a complex, dynamic area of study that draws from a wide range of critical theories including psychoanalysis, Marxism, anthropology and structuralism. Feminist theorists celebrate the identity of women, defend their rights and promote women's writings and literary works as a representation of their experiences. They criticize heterosexuality which, for them, organizes identities and culture in terms of the opposition between man and women.

Most feminist literary theories share several assumptions: They generally agree that male-female gender relations impact all aspects of human social existence by establishing series of binarisms, such as: active/passive, presence/absence, universal/ particular in which the feminilized term occupies the devalued place. Feminists agree that female stereotypes expose women as soft, passive, vulnerable, and domestic made for children care and husband care. And, sometimes, women with ambitions of male dimensions are considered less female. According to Cathrine.A.Mackinon, *Feminist theory* (1982) female gender stereotypes whether manifested in fiction or in reality are revealed as sexual:

Vulnerability means the appearance/ reality of easy sexual access. Passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance, enforced by physical weakness. Mackinon asserts that socially femaleness means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which, in turn, means sexual availability on male terms. Women, for her, are defined according to men's perception. For example, "Good girls" are attractive, "Bad girls" are provocative. Gender socialization: the process through which women identify themselves as sexual beings, internalize a male image of their sexuality and their identity as women.

Women's situation has been also explained as a consequence of biology. Simone de Beauvoir, the second sex (1970) criticizes social meanings with biological determination or what she calls "anatomical destiny". She states that "Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of life when even in her own view life doesn't carry within itself reasons for being, reasons that are more important than life."(p59). Another quotation by Shulamith Firestone, *the Dialectic of Sex: the case of Feminist Revolution* (1972), considers women's situation as pre-social, she states that "unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality; men and women were created different and not equally privileged ...the biological family s an inherently unequal power distinction".

Sexuality then, is a form of power. Gender, as socially constructed, embodies it. Women and men are divided by gender n by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission.

Generally, feminist literary criticism exists to counter, resist, and eventually eliminate the traditions and conventions of *patriarchy* the ideology or belief system which sees as "natural" the dominance and superiority of men over women in both private and public contexts--as it exists in literary, historical, and critical contexts. As we have seen in our discussions of Marxism and ideology, the fact that the goals of feminist criticism are "literary" does not necessarily limit its effects to the arena of "culture" or the academy. If, as in Althusser's theory, the "superstructural" elements of a given society (such as its literature) are needed to "educate" a population to reproduce its present economic relations, feminist literary criticism may be seen to *intervene* in the process of culture's self-reproduction to make visible the injustices of present relations between men and women, and perhaps, keep them from being reproduced in the future.

Feminist interventions in literary and literary-critical modes have taken any number of shapes over the past two centuries. While Western literature has (at least since the romantic period) taken for granted that its reader, writer and critic is male, feminist criticism has shown that male and female readers bring different perspectives to texts and thus (after the notion introduced in reader-response and strengthened in post-structuralism) "produce" very different interpretations and thus very different "texts"--even in the act of reading. Feminist critics have also called attention to unique female literary traditions and modes of reading informed, if not wholly determined by, women's historical oppression in patriarchal society. These traditions may be overt (as in, say, the actual allusions of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich to a figure such as Emily Dickinson), or covert, legible, for example, only through post-Freudian psychological analyses. In all cases, feminist criticism *makes space for* and *listens to* women's voices previously muted or drowned out by dominant patriarchal literary-critical practices.

In practice, feminist literary criticism is not limited to texts written and read by women, for its interest is not only how 'women' have been treated in books per se, but how notions of *gender and sexuality*, generally, have determined or enforced an inferior place for many different voices of women, of racial and ethnic minorities, and of gay and lesbian writer and readers of literature. Its target may include stereotypes of any of these groups *as seen* as inferior from the point of view of an established patriarchal order, or the exclusion of such groups created by such a point of view (or ideological bias) in literary history.

There are no "rules"-no "recipe"-to doing feminist criticism. Rather, feminist literary critics may employ, for example, reader-response criticism to present a reading of a text in which female characters are traditionally ignored, or to reveal how the text itself (in an Iserian view), seems to "imply" or elicit a feminist reading, or, conversely, how the text seems to beg for a reading that ignores the full humanity of its female characters. Likewise, a feminist literary critic might deconstruct any text whose chief binary opposition implies a hierarchy in which the masculine elements are predominant. Many recent feminist critics have exposed the patriarchal nature of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, but rather than abandon it altogether they have expanded its models to include and acknowledge, for example, those homoerotic relations between mother and daughter or between female subjects that Freud's theory would ignore or discount as mere "perversions."

Questions to be asked while applying Feminist Criticism

- How is gender represented/ constructed in this text?
- What are the text's assumptions regarding gender?
- What are the images of women/ men in the text (especially images of women in texts by men)?
- How and why is woman identified as "Other" (merely the negative object) to man, who is then seen as the defining and dominating "Subject"?
- What are the covert ways in which power is manipulated in the text so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and subordination of women?
- What are the female points of view, concerns, and values presented in the text? And if absent, how so and why?

Feminism as manifested in literature:

Generally, feminist literary theory is divided into four trends focusing on various ways on gender-based textual issues.

- 1- An analysis of the representation of women in male-authored texts.
- 2- Gynocriticism: refers to the development of a uniquely female aesthetic and alternative, women's literary tradition.
- 3- Gender studies on the analysis of the ways all text is marked by gender.
- 4- Exploration of how racial, sexual and class differences among women expand previous models of gendered reading and writing.

Feminist women writers have addressed the issues of masculinized writing through male gendered language which, according to them, may not serve to accommodate the literary understanding of women's lives. Such masculinized language the feminist theorists address is the use of, for example "God the father" which is looked upon as a way of designating the sacred only to men. Biblical language, for them, glorifies men through all of the masculine pronouns like *He-Him* while addressing God. For example, Alice Walker in *The color Purple*, addresses this issue in the name of one of her female characters and says:

“Well, as we talk and talk about gender, but I am still adrift trying to chase that old man out of my head. I have been so busy thinking about him. I never truly notice making God make”.

Virginia Woolf also resists the kind of male metaphysical world symbolized by the philosopher Ramsay in *To The Light House*. Ramsay's world works by abstract truths, sharp divisions of fixed essence. It is, according to Terry Eagleton, “a patriarchal world, for the phallus is the symbol of sure, self identical truth and it is not to be challenged”. (p.189) Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (1983).

Eagleton further states “the woman is both inside and outside male society, both a romantically idealized member of it and a victimized outcast. She is sometimes what stands between man and chaos, and sometimes the embodiment of chaos itself. (p190)

Draw Backs:

Feminist theory is criticized, at least the first phase, for seeking universal equality and overlook sexual difference.

Kristiva, for example, rejects what she sees as the second phase of feminism, which seeks a uniquely feminine language which, she thinks, is impossible.

She also doesn't agree with the feminist who maintain that language and culture are eventually patriarchal and must be abandoned. Kristiva insists that culture and language are the domains of speaking beings, and women are primarily speaking beings.

Women's Studies Terminology

Epistemology: The study of how we know or gain knowledge. Feminist epistemology refers to the way feminists as a whole have constructed alternative forms of knowledge and self-expression.

Essentialism: A belief in the real, true essence of things; an investment in the invariable and fixed properties that define something.

Exoticization: The process by which a person or group of people is simultaneously sexualized and made "Other" (e.g., tourist brochures often exoticize Hawaiian women).

Feminization: The process by which something takes on the characteristics of the stereotypically feminine.

Fluid: Resisting one fixed and unchangeable form (e.g., fluid sexuality, fluid identity).

"The Gaze": The symbolic and literal act of looking at, and objectifying, those in a lower position of power than oneself.

Gender identity: The subjective but continuous, persistent sense of oneself as male or female.

Gender presentation: The presentation of one's gender through personality or bodily dress.

Gender roles: Behaviors, attitudes, values, or beliefs that a cultural group considers appropriate for males vs. females on the basis of biological sex (e.g., dolls vs. trucks, pink vs. blue).

Herstory vs. history: The conscious effort of feminist historians to revise the largely male narrative of history to include adequate representation of women and their legacy (herstory).

Hierarchical binaries: The relationship between two opposite entities such that one becomes dominant and highly valued while the other becomes nondominant and devalued.

Identity politics: The examination of marginalized (nondominant) identities with the goal of challenging dominant categorizations while also asserting greater self-determination.

Logocentrism: A system of analysis focused on words and language at the exclusion of historical context or an author's individuality.

"The Man" (singular, capitalized): A symbolic reference to all institutionalized oppression (e.g., "working for The Man").

Master narrative/metanarrative: The idea of one singular text that describes the course of history. This narrative tends to exclude the histories of oppressed peoples, including women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and the poor.

Matrilineal/matrilocal: Refers to kinship and descent traced through the mother.

Naturalization vs. denaturalization: The process by which something takes on the characteristics of the innate, natural, or given (e.g., to naturalize sex roles) vs. the process by which the supposedly "natural" is constructed as social, changeable, and political (e.g., to denaturalize gender).

Nature/culture: A central and defining hierarchical binary that divides the world according to the natural, uncivilized, and barbaric versus the cultural, civilized, and refined.

Oppression: Cruel or unjust exercise of power or authority over others.

Other/Otherness/Othered (capitalized): Refers to the concept of difference or oppositeness from oneself, often with negative connotations. Can be used as a verb (to Other), noun (Other), or descriptive phrase (Otherness).

Patriarchal: Recognizing fathers, and all men, as the leaders and rulers of the family and society.

Patrilineal/patrilocal: Refers to kinship and descent traced through the father.

Penis envy: In psychoanalysis, the process by which young girls recognize their genitals as lacking a penis, and therefore develop envy of the size and symbolic power of the penis.

Phallogocentrism: Derived from the word "phallus" (male penis). This refers to something that is centered on men or a male viewpoint, especially related to the domination of women.

Phallogocentrism: A combination of phallogocentrism and logocentrism, resulting in an ahistorical and noncontextualized view of male dominance, thus limiting and restricting knowledge while also forming the roots of women's oppression.

Repression: Forcible subjugation or oppression; in psychoanalysis, the unconscious exclusion of painful fears, impulses, and desires from the conscious mind.

Sex vs. gender: Sex refers to the biological aspects of being male or female; gender refers to the social aspects of being male or female.

Sexual identity: The “objective” characterization of one’s physiological status as male or female.

Sexual orientation: Inclination toward same-sex and/or opposite-sex partners (e.g., homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual).

Sex role stereotype: The socially determined model that contains beliefs about what certain gender roles should be.

Sex typing: Differential treatment of people based on their biological sex.

Sexuality: The dimension of human existence involving sexual acts, preferences, behaviors, and identities.

Social constructionism: The dynamic process by which social phenomena (e.g., sexuality, money, marriage) are created, institutionalized, and made into tradition. Such phenomena often appear natural, inherent, or immutable, but in reality, are politically constituted, socially created, and potentially changeable.

Subject/object: A central dichotomy in feminist theory, which posits that dominant groups (male, white, heterosexual) construct the reality of nondominant groups. Those in control of reality (subjects) dictate the worldview of those with no control of reality (objects).

Truth vs. truth: Refers to the traditional/phallogocentric/modernist idea of one reality (Truth) versus the nontraditional/feminist/postmodernist idea of multiple realities (truth).

Womyn: A term used by radical feminists to take the term “man” out of “woman,” with the goal of raising awareness of language bias and the ways in which language shapes perceptions and ideas of gender and gender roles

Can I Buy a Vowel? By *Inesheia Holiday*

I been searching so long for a poem that understands me
a poem that heals me, and feels me
fills me with something that is lacking within
I need a poem that expresses how I been contemplating where I should move my pieces
why can't I read a poem that breathes the same rhythm as me
cuz I aint took a deep breath in so long
I got something stuck in my soul
and it is not allowing me to breathe or see or write or read or recite quite right
and I need a poem a poem that makes my stride lite
I need a poem that knows my pain
cuz I don' felt it now I need a poem that cries my tears cuz it aint none left for me to cry,
and I need a poem a word a phrase that takes me into consideration
I need a poem that knows my faith, how strong it is
even though I don't go to church every Sunday or bible study on Tuesday,
I close my eyes and can get closer to my God than any corrupted church can get me
I need a poem that knows how hard I love I love a man and he gets all of me every
molecule I offer to him I don't expect the same from him though
not many people can love with there entire self ,
and I need a poem that know.... THAT. about me a poem that can recite me a poem that
writes me !
I need a poem cuz nobody can touch me the way the words do
who can write a poem that has studied and learned me truly
the me that hides behind, these child bearing hips and full lips
I want a poem that tells me I am more than beautiful, more than sexy more than what a
man could ever see in me
And I need it now cuz
My pen is running out of ink!

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