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**FEMINIST CRITICISM**

This theory is understanding, analysis of, and response to literary works and /or language, and /or the institutions of literary study or literary theory from the point of view of women’s experience.

Feminist criticism grew out of the women’s movement that followed World War II and seeks to analyse the role of gender in works of literature. A leading feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, describes two purposes of feminist criticism: first, feminist critique (the analysis of works by male authors, especially in the depiction of women’s writing); and secondly, gynocriticism (the study of women’s writing). Beyond this, feminist critics have also focused on recovering neglected works by women authors through the ages and creating a canon of women’s writing. Importantly, gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

Feminist/gender criticism examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a "patriarchal" society that have hindered or prevented women from realising their creative possibilities and women's cultural identification as a merely negative object, or "Other," to man as the defining and dominating "Subject." There are several assumptions and concepts held in common by most feminist critics. First is that our civilisation is pervasively patriarchal. Second, is that the concepts of "gender" are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, effected by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilisation. The third is that this patriarchal ideology also pervades those writings that have been considered great literature. Such works, feminist critics aver, lack autonomous female role model, and are implicitly addressed to male readers, leaving the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting. In this unit, you will be introduced to feminist/gender criticism and the forces that influenced it.

**THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST CRITICISM**

Feminist or gender criticism, bases its interpretations on ideas about the nature and experience of women. With the rise of feminism in the 1950s and 1960s, feminist critics claimed that, over the years, men had controlled the most influential interpretive communities. Men decided which conventions made up "literature" and judged the quality of works. Men wrote the literary histories and drew up the lists of "great" works—the literary canon. Because works by and about women were omitted from the canon, women authors were ignored, and women characters misconstrued. Since the 1960s, however, feminist literary critics have successfully challenged these circumstances. Many more women now teach, interpret, evaluate, and theorise about literature than ever before. Literary genres practised by women, such as diaries, journals, and letters, have gained more respect. Numerous anthologies, literary histories and interpretive studies explore women's contributions to literature. Today, a new movement, "gender studies," has evolved out of feminist studies in order to address broader issues; notably, the nature of both femininity and masculinity, the differences within each sex, and the literary treatment of men and homosexuals. Feminist criticism is political in that it argues for the fair representation and treatment of women.

**STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST CRITICISM**

Scholars have attempted to periodise the stages of emergence of feminist criticism. However, it should be noted that this categorisation is not cast on stone. A survey of the history of feminist and gender criticism helps to spotlight their concerns. The first stage of feminist criticism began with two influential books, they are, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). Both authors criticise the distorted representation of women by well-known male authors. Their works laid the foundation for the most prevalent approach of this stage, the "images of women" approach. Following de Beauvoir and Millet, feminist critics called attention to the unjust, distorted, and limited representation (images) of females in works of literature, especially works authored by males. They celebrated realistic representations of women and brought to light neglected works by and about women. They sought to expose the "politics" of self-interest that led people to create stereotypical and false images of women.

In the second stage of feminist criticism, beginning in the early 1970s, critics shifted away from works by males to concentrate on works by females. Elaine Showalter, a prominent critic from this period, called this approach "gynocriticism”.

Gynocritics urged women to become familiar with female authors and to discover their own female "language," a language that supposedly enters the subconscious before the "patriarchal" language of the dominant culture. They tried to delineate a female poetics, a use of literary conventions and genres that seems typically "female." Some critics-based feminist poetics on the possible connection between writing and the female body. Because women's bodies have more fluids than men's, they argued, women's writing is more "fluid." It is less structured, less unified, more inclusive of many points of view, less given to neat endings, and more open to fantasy than writing by men. It rejects or undermines the "marriage plot" and the "happy ending," in which a strong female protagonist submits to a male by marrying him. Female poetics seeks to understand why female authors tend to favour certain genres (lyric poetry, novel, short story, tale, letters, diaries, and memoirs) over others (epic, martial romance, drama, and satire).

The third stage of feminist criticism rebelled against the "essentialist" assumptions of gynocriticism with its focus on the cultural creation of identity. The third stage of feminist criticism attempts to distinguish between "sex" and "gender." While sex is the biological difference between males and females, gender is the cultural difference. Culture determines the traits and behaviour that set masculinity apart from femininity. Western culture, for example, has seen women as passive rather than active, irrational rather than rational, subjective rather than objective, at home rather than at "work," spiritual rather than material, and impractical rather than practical. It has ruled that certain kinds of behaviour are "abnormal" and "unnatural" for females to practise, such as pursuing careers, doing construction work, being pastors or priests, wearing "male" clothes, or being assertive. Such gender distinctions, feminist critics claim, are arbitrary and almost always give women less power, status, and respect than men. They argue that many women are "trapped" by the gender traits assigned to them by culture.

The three "stages" of feminist criticism highlighted have overlapped and coexisted and continued to be practised.

**THEORETICAL POSTULATIONS OF FEMINIST CRITICISM**

Feminist criticism covers almost anything that has to do with female emancipation and empowerment. Jide Balogun (2011) holds that Feminist criticism is an attempt by the women-folk to universally liberate itself from male chauvinism and patriarchy. He argues that while the shift is not intended to cause gender terrorism, it aims at making the position of women at home, at work, at school, in the street etc. more challenging to themselves and their men-folk in the social phenomenon. The radical posture of feminist criticism is reflected in its dissatisfaction with the place of women in global social and cultural situations. Because of its interest in social issues, feminist criticism, like Marxism, is historical, and political, and it proposes a dynamic ideological commitment.

The feminist literary critic’s interest is to pursue the cause of women in literary texts. This is accomplished by encouraging women authors to write novels, plays and poems. Furthermore, the feminist literary writer features and makes women characters and ideas dominant in her works. Such writers endeavour to propagate “feminist thought, female concerns, ideas and accomplishments and to recover the largely unrecorded and unknown history of women in earlier times” (Jerome Beaty, 2002).

According to Lois Tyson (2006), feminist criticism examines the ways in which literary texts reinforce patriarchy because the ability to see when and how patriarchal ideology operates is crucial to one’s ability to resist it in one’s life. Feminists have observed that the belief that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. For feminist critics, patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically, and patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, a woman is the *other:* she is objectified and marginalised, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, and by what she (allegedly) lacks but which men (allegedly) have.

Feminist critics tend to see their criticism as correcting the imbalance, by analysing and combating patriarchy. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by promoting women’s equality. Thus, feminist activity can be seen as a form of *activism* that directly promotes social change in favour of women. Among the foremost feminist writers in Africa include the Ghanaian playwright and author of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965); Zulu Sofola, the Nigerian playwright and author of *Old Wives are Tasty* (1991); Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian novelists and author of *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Bina Nengi-Ilagha the Nigerian author of *Condolences* (2002).

Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literary texts reinforce patriarchy because the ability to see when and how patriarchal ideology operates is crucial to one’s ability to resist it in one’s life. The duty of the feminist literary critic is to pursue the cause of women in literary texts. This is accomplished by encouraging women authors to write novels, plays and poems. Furthermore, the feminist literary writer endeavours to feature and make women characters and ideas dominant in her works.