

## 13. Feminist Literary Theory

### 1. Introduction

Feminist literary theory is a critical approach that examines how literature reflects, challenges, or reinforces the political, social, and economic oppression of women and other marginalized genders. It analyzes literary texts through the lens of gender dynamics, exploring themes such as patriarchy, sexism, representation, and identity. Feminist literary theory seeks to uncover hidden biases, stereotypes, and power structures within literature, while also highlighting women's experiences, voices, and contributions. It critiques traditional interpretations and values diverse perspectives, aiming to promote gender equality and social justice both within literature and society at large.

### 2. Background History

Feminist criticism dates back to well before our time although women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s sparked a contemporary feminist criticism, texts that were written much earlier call for a certain feminist critique. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s were calling attention to the unfortunate female experiences under male power. There was a shift in feminist critique and theory by the 1980s that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar helped move into action. Before the 1980s, feminist theory was more about the stereotypes that men had against females, and after the 1980s, feminist theory was more about the rearranging of forms that were seen as "feminine", like a diary. There were two kinds of feminists: liberal and radical. The liberal feminists believed that, ultimately, gender was something that was constructed, and feminism should go outside of that construct that was built around them. The radical feminists believed that there was a certain female essence, and that essence should be embraced by women. These two types of feminists would lead into the two of the key ideas of feminist theory today: essentialist and constructivist.

Constructivist feminism, on the other hand, has roots in Marxism. The constructivist feminists believe that gender is formed by culture in history. They believe that patriarchal culture constructed gender identities with the intention to make men seem superior to women. While essentialist feminists see female identity and psychology as inherently different from men, constructivist feminists see these differences as products of conditioning.

### 3. Feminist Literary criticism

Feminist literary criticism is an interdisciplinary approach which focuses on gender politics. It rarely confines itself to merely textual analysis; rather, it looks at the text within the society in which it was produced in order to discover what this tells us about what gender means in that particular context. It emphasizes the ways in which discrimination against women is manifested and how this can be resisted and countered. Unlike many other academic approaches, therefore, feminist criticism is not simply a theoretical approach; it also has political aims.

Feminist criticism developed from the women's movement in Europe and North America in the 1960s, the so-called second wave of feminism. This movement was characterized by the founding of a number of consciousness-raising groups whose

Fundamental beliefs can be summarized by the slogan "The personal is political", meaning that personal experience is neither individual nor isolated, rather it is social, political, and systematic. First-wave feminism, which began around 1860 and started to decline in 1918, secured rights that were previously denied women, such as the right to education and the right to vote. Various works of feminist literary criticism came out of and followed on from the first wave, such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and many such writings share a number of concerns apparent in more recent work. However, such early works were relatively isolated and it was not until the early 1970s that feminist criticism began to constitute a body of study with its own distinct identity. This identity has never been homogeneous; it has varied according to the identity and political perspective of the individual critic; moreover, it has changed through time as critics have responded to and developed the work of their predecessors.

### The 1970s

Initially, Anglo-American feminist criticism was primarily concerned with challenging the notion of the canon in two main ways. First, critics noted that the texts which constituted the canon were mainly male-authored and that their representations of female characters tended to be largely negative and stereotyped. For example, Kate Millett (1970) documented the ways in which many canonical authors represented women as sexual objects whose needs were subservient to those of the text's male protagonists. Second, in a shift that has been termed "gynocriticism", critics sought an alternative tradition to the male canon believing that this would offer examples of more positive representations of women. For example, Elaine Showalter (1977) drew attention to a tradition of neglected women novelists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, Showalter highlighted the pressures that inhibited women's writing, including material circumstances, such as economic dependence; and social pressures, most significantly the pressure to conform to the dominant definition of femininity, which did not incorporate the notion of woman-as-writer. Any women's writing produced in these circumstances could thus be regarded as a significant achievement.

Many gynocritics saw femininity as a social construct, that is, something created through social conditioning. Additionally, they believed that it hindered women's creativity. However, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) took a more complex position. They combined a social constructionist perspective with a psychoanalytical approach to suggest that femininity was not only a constraint on women's creativity but also, simultaneously, a source of creative tension. They argued that women writers of the nineteenth century had been considered the only natural form of female creativity. All other forms of creativity were considered as harmful to women's physical and mental health-leading to infertility, on the one hand, and madness, on the other. Additionally, an unlicensed female imagination was seen as an indication of unlicensed female sexuality. Thus, in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Bertha Rochester is interpreted as a mirror image of the eponymous heroine, able to express what both Jane and Bronte are unable to articulate: their anger at women's confinement within the domestic context and within their bodies. Although gynocriticism was an important stage in feminist criticism, it has been criticized: in creating an alternative "women's" tradition, it constructed a canon that was just as exclusive, in its own way, as the

*male tradition had been, since most of the writers it privileged were middle-class, white, and (ostensibly, anyway) heterosexual.*

A final significant strand of 1970s Anglo-American feminist criticism was a body of work that has come to be known as the "female aesthetic". This uses literary styles and forms that are seen as coming from an especially female experience, and much of this work blurs the distinction between critical and creative writing. For example, Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1977), is a feminist exploration of both the expression and the suppression of black women's creativity. Whilst this draws on A Room of One's Own, it also makes use of biography and personal testimony, prose fiction, and poetry. Adrienne Rich (1979) advocated a similar search for an avantgarde form of writing; however, she saw this as deriving from lesbianism, which she saw as present in all women. During this same period in France, a strand of feminist criticism which bore some similarities to the female aesthetic was developing. Building on the work of Jacques Lacan and poststructuralists, a number of scholars, chiefly, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, described a style of writing which they termed l'écriture féminine. This undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western writing since it is characterized by absences, ruptures, the irrational, the chaotic, and sexual pleasure or jouissance. Many French feminist critics have attempted to create a critical form of l'écriture féminine by emphasizing textual pleasure, and using devices such as puns and neologisms. Although some critics maintained that l'écriture féminine can be written by either women or men, many argued that it was more likely to be produced by women; further, women had an interest in writing it because of its subversive qualities which could counter their oppression. Despite some similarities between the female aesthetic and l'écriture féminine, many observers saw the Anglo-American and French feminist critical traditions as oppositional, with the former concerned with the analysis of experience and issue such as the canon, whilst the latter focused on overtly theoretical issues.

As a result of the 1970s' debates about feminist literary criticism, in many European and North American countries women's writing became accepted into the academy as part of the curriculum, both within mainstream literature courses and separately as part of women's studies. This move was facilitated by the publication of a number of women-authored texts that had previously gone out of print. Many such work were reprinted by the new feminist publishing houses, such as Virago which was launched in Britain in 1978 with the republication of Anonima White's Frost in May (first published in 1933). The growth of both feminist publishing houses and academic courses ensured the proliferation of feminist criticism into the 1980s.

### The 1980s

The 1980s can be characterized as a decade in which feminist literary critics looked both backward, to earlier feminist critical work, and outward, to the work of feminists in other disciplines. Sometimes the earlier work was developed relatively uncritically; sometimes it was rigorously attacked and found to be lacking. The work in other disciplines often forced literary critics to adapt their own approaches in order to incorporate the most interesting and effective aspects of these alternative approaches.

One of the critics who reviewed some of the earlier work was Toril Mol (1985). She broke down the perceived opposition between the Anglo-American and French tradition; through a summary and analysis of the main kinds of these criticisms, albeit with the notable exclusion of black studies. Moreover, she introduced the possibility of incorporating the two traditions. Subsequently, others, including Sara Mills and her coeditors (1989), have drawn on her work to bring a combined approach to a number of well-known literary texts. However, at the same time, other critics still worked mainly in one of these two traditions. Following on from Showalter's exploration of nineteenth-and twentieth-century novelists, Jane Spencer (1986) explored the work of a number of neglected women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This exploration of an earlier period enabled her to claim that women writers played a much more important role in the development of the novel than had been allowed by other (male) historians of the genre.

However, whilst others found it useful to develop some of the 1970s' gynocriticism, Showalter (1989) herself was questioning the very premises upon which her own earlier work was based. In a move which situates her close to the earlier position taken up by Millett, Showalter argued against a gynocritical approach, suggesting instead that feminist critics now needed to focus on gender and sexual difference in texts by men as much as by women. Other critics also challenged some of the earlier gynocriticism. Looking back to the work of Gilbert and Gubar, Terry Lovell (1987) argued that texts that they identified as subversive were often more complicit with existing power structures than they allowed since such works privileged heterosexual romance and marriage. Whilst Showalter and Lovell can be seen as reacting against one specific theoretical approach, Audre Lorde's (1984) attack on earlier feminist criticism was much broader. She argued that most of such work was flawed since it drew upon the methods and language inherited from a male critical tradition: "the master's house". Additionally, Lorde, along with a number of other lesbian critics, attacked the heterosexism of much existing literary criticism, both feminist and non feminist. As part of this attack they challenged male-defined concepts of femininity and examined lesbian images and strategies.

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Another significant reaction to earlier work, both feminist and non feminist, came from postcolonial feminist literary theory. This reacted against two main tendencies: the lack of address to gender issues in mainstream postcolonial theory, and universalizing within feminist work. For example, Gayatri Spivak (1985), in her reading of Jane Eyre and Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), critiqued feminists' tendency to focus on the white central female characters in such texts arguing that this kind of reading ignores both the production and marginalization of other characters. In her own interpretation of Wide Sargasso Sea she argued that even as Rhys attempted a rewriting of Jane Eyre, the constraints of the genre she adopted, the novel, meant that she could not avoid rewriting from the perspective of the colonizer. Thus Christophine the Martiniquan maid, whilst treated sympathetically to some extent, is still, ultimately, marginalized within the novel. However, whilst some feminists were developing and reacting against existing feminist criticism, others were questioning the definition of theory itself. Barbara Christian (1987) argued that defining theory as abstract logic privileged a Western philosophical tradition and excluded the theorizing of people of color which is found in story-making and telling, riddles, and proverbs.

Despite such debates, many other feminist critics still found the use of theory effective. However, the theories within the discipline of literature, even those which were feminist, were increasingly perceived as less than adequate and many feminist critics looked to work being written by feminists in other disciplines to compensate for this inadequacy. Whilst feminist criticism has traditionally been interdisciplinary, combining textual analysis with an interest in the social construction of gender, during the 1980s this interdisciplinary approach broadened to incorporate work in disciplines previously ignored. For example, feminist critics looked to gender theory in science, such as Evelyn Fox Kelter's (1992) feminist critiques of the construction of science; history, including Joan Scott's (1992) discussions of an approach which is both feminist and poststructuralist; and queer theory, which identifies and reverses homophobic categories to link sexuality with and race political activism, as in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985) study which identifies the links between homophobia and misogyny. The legacy of such incorporations plus the revisions of the earlier feminist criticism meant that feminist literary critics writing in the 1990s inherited a rich legacy on which they could base their work.

## The 1990s

The combining of existing feminist criticism with feminist theory from other disciplines proved to be a productive dynamic in the 1990s. Important influences on feminist literary criticism in the 1990s included Liesbet van Zoonen's (1994) work in media studies. The close relationship between some media study approaches, which consider the visual and narrative characteristics of texts and genres through semiotic and structural analysis, the traditional literary criticism has meant that this relationship has been a comfortable one and conducive to the production of much interesting work. A number of important feminist studies in the 1990s were anthologies which placed explorations of literary texts alongside examinations of media texts or popular cultural forms. For example, Frances Bonner and her coeditors (1992) juxtaposed essays on genre and genre and the short story with essays on science fiction, blockbuster novels, TV soap operas, and stand-up comedy. Similar multimedia, interdisciplinary approaches can be found in the work of Sara Mills (1994) and Beverley Skeggs (1995).

Additionally, such approaches have often mirrored the definition of femininity used by many feminists working in the areas of media and cultural studies. Angela McRobbie (1996) notes that women's and girls' magazines contain a series of different female subjectivities which may complement or contradict each other, and Ien Ang (1996) sees this as influential, positing femininity as a shifting identity which women may continually construct and reconstruct. Such a conceptualization of femininity, which has effectively deconstructed the term "woman", is believed by many to have proved to be more conducive to inclusive forms of feminism than the monolithic femininity privileged in much of the early feminist criticism. For example, Maggie Humm (1998) has observed that 1990s' feminist literary criticism has been, positively, characterized by the crossing of borders, both disciplinary and geographical. However, other feminists are concerned that the deconstruction of woman undermines the possibility of a united politics.

## Conclusion

Since the late 1960s, the term feminist literary criticism has been used to discuss a number of diverse and dynamic approaches to literature. Initially these approaches focused on challenging the androcentrism of the canon, rediscovering women writers previously "lost in history", and creating an alternative female tradition. However, over subsequent decades this work has been both developed and challenged and a more complex range of approaches has evolved. Such approaches tend to eschew the notion of a monolithic femininity and acknowledge that the term "woman" incorporates a number of diverse groups of women. However, whilst doing so, they still seek to retain ways of revealing and resisting discrimination against women. The tension between, on the one hand, the politics of feminism, which assumes women's shared oppression, and, on the other, the realization that woman can no longer be discussed as a homogeneous term, has resulted in the production of much complex and exciting work. Feminist literary criticism thus continues to be an important area of study in its own right and to also influence other areas of literature, criticism and study.

## 4. Important Writers

Feminist literary theory has been shaped by numerous influential scholars who have critically analyzed literature through the lens of gender, power dynamics, and representation. These scholars have contributed significantly to understanding how literature reflects and shapes cultural attitudes towards gender, while also advocating for the recognition of women's voices and experiences. Here are some prominent writers of feminist literary theory, along with their notable works:

### i. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

De Beauvoir's book "The Second Sex" (1949) is a foundational text in feminist theory. Although primarily a philosophical work, it critiques the construction of womanhood as the 'Other' in Western thought and literature. De Beauvoir's analysis of women's oppression and the social construction of gender influenced feminist literary theory by highlighting the ways in which literature reinforces or challenges societal norms and stereotypes.

### ii. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929) is a seminal feminist text that explores the conditions necessary for women to produce literature. Woolf argues for the importance of economic independence and intellectual freedom for women writers. Her novels, such as "Mrs. Dalloway" (1925) and "To the Lighthouse" (1927), also reflect feminist themes by portraying women's inner lives, societal constraints, and challenges to self-expression.

### iii. Judith Butler (1956-present)

Butler's book "Bodies that Matter: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1993) had a profound impact on feminist theory and literary studies. She argues that gender is performative and socially constructed, challenging binary notions of identity. Butler's work

explores how literature and language participate in the production and regulation of gender norms. Her subsequent writings, including "Bodies That Matter" (1993) and "Undoing Gender" (2004), further develop these ideas within the context of feminist literary theory.

#### iv. bell hooks (1952-2021)

Hooks' book "Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism" (1981) examines the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within feminist theory. Her work emphasizes the experiences of Black women and challenges mainstream feminism's exclusion of marginalized voices. hooks' writings on literature, including "Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black" (1989) and "Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice" (2013), explore how literature can both perpetuate and challenge systems of oppression.

#### v. Elaine Showalter (1941-present)

Showalter's essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979) is a foundational text in feminist literary criticism, advocating for a literary theory that examines how gender influences literary production and reception. Her book "A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing" (1977) traces the development of women's writing in England and argues for the recognition of a distinct female literary tradition. Showalter's scholarship has contributed to the institutionalization of feminist literary studies within academia.

#### vi. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-present)

Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is a landmark in postcolonial feminist theory, examining the intersection of gender, race, and class in the representation of marginalized voices. Her work challenges Western feminist perspectives that may overlook or silence the experiences of women from the Global South. Spivak's engagement with literature and culture in works like "In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics" (1987) has expanded feminist literary theory by emphasizing the importance of decolonizing knowledge production and representation.

These writers and their works have significantly shaped feminist literary theory by addressing issues of gender inequality, representation, intersectionality, and the politics of reading and writing. Their contributions continue to influence how literature is studied, taught, and understood within feminist frameworks, fostering critical dialogue and advocacy for social change.

Simon de Beauvoir → The Second Sex.

Virginia Woolf → A Room of One's Own.

Mrs. Dalloway + To the Lighthouse

Bell hooks → Ain't I a woman? Black Woman & Feminism