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A Critique of Twentieth Century Feminist Criticism

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Abstract

Feminist criticism arose in response to developments in the field of the feminist movement. Many thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft raised their voice against the injustice done to women in every sphere of life. As this gained momentum throughout the world, feminist also awakened to the depiction and representation of women in literature which is one of the influential medium of socialization and culture. They argued that woman and womanhood are not biological facts but are given social constructs. One is not born a woman, but becomes one through culture and socialization. At first, feminist criticism was reactionary in the nature in the sense that they exposed stereotypical images of women in the literature. These images of women were promulgated by the male writers. These images of women were what men think of women. Gradually, feminist criticism moved from this phase to more constructive work. They unearthed many women writers that were either suppressed or neglected by the male literary tradition. In this way, they created a separate literary tradition of women writers. Feminist critics divided this tradition in such phases as feminine phase, feminist phase and female phase. They also studied the problems faced by female

creative writers. They used theories from post-structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis to study the nature of female creativity. They also realized that there is an innate difference between male and female modes of writing. Feminist critics also exposed the sexist nature of man-made language. They also exposed phallic centrism of much of the western literary theory and criticism. They also started to study the language used by the women writers. Simone De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter and Juliet Mitchell are some of the feminist critics discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Feminism, Gynocriticism, Sexuality, Feminist Criticism, Women's Creativity, Phallogocentric, Sexual Politics, Images of Women, Social Construct

Feminist criticism is the offshoot of feminism that got its true Momentum in the 1960s. Feminist movements worldwide raised the awareness about women's lives in all the spheres of life, be it in the economic, social, political, cultural and religious fields. Women faced discrimination in all the fields of life and literature and criticism are no exception to it. Women writers were either suppressed or they don't get their due importance and recognition in the history of literature and literary criticism. The western literary theory and criticism was dominated by white, male theorists from the very beginning. Feminist criticism tries to subvert this male domination and patriarchal culture and theories regarding literary creation and criticism. It tries to create a suitable/proper atmosphere for women writers and theorists.

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949) is the first great book which has voiced basic questions of modern feminism with great clarity. The importance of this book can be gauged from the fact that it is called as 'feminist Bible'. This book's influence is felt even in the 21st century which underlies the greatness and importance of the book. The first English edition of *The Second Sex* appeared in 1953. In the book Simone de Beauvoir criticizes the patriarchal nature of human society and the inferior status given to women in social, political and religious spheres of life. The book has a very broad historical perspective which details injustice done to women from the historical times. She makes a plea for equal opportunities and equal vocation for men and women irrespective of their sex. She argued strongly against the demotion of women to second place that have happened historically and it was still happening in the 20th century. She challenges the political, social and existential theories underlying woman's demotion in the society. The myths and definition of woman and womanhood had been used by patriarchal, male dominated society throughout the centuries to exploit women. Simone de Beauvoir says that one is not born a woman but becomes one through socialization. Women must break free from social and cultural constructs of womanhood to realise their full potential and get freedom from patriarchal society.

A Literature of Their Own (1986) by Elaine Showalter is another landmark book in the feminist criticism. The first proposition made by Showalter is that women writing in general have been neglected by the male critics in English literature and literatures in other languages. Second proposition is that there is an innate difference between men's writing and

women's writing. Only a woman can understand women's creativity and writing and do justice to women's writing and literature. Elaine Showalter divides the tradition of women's writing in three phases

1. Feminine Phase (1842 to 1880): The feminine phase runs from 1842 to 1880 and it is the first phase in women's literary tradition. In this first phase, women writer wrote to equal the intellectual levels attained by male. They also adopted assumptions made by male culture about women. They were just learning their craft and were ignorant of other implications of adopting men as their role models for writing. They didn't acknowledge their writing openly and wrote under male pseudonyms. Elaine Showalter says about this first phase of feminism, "The feminist content of feminine art is typically oblique, displaced ironic and subversive; one has to read it between the lines, in missed possibilities of text" (Showalter, 217). Women writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot belong to feminine phase.

2. Feminist Phase (1880 to 1920): This is the second phase of women's writing and it runs from 1880 to 1920. The women got the right to vote in this period. The women writers used this period to depict the struggles, conflicts and ordeals of being a woman in the male dominated, patriarchal society. This was a radical period when woman writers tried to break free from male notions of culture and literature. Raman Selden writes about this second phase in following words, "The radical feminists of this period advocated separatist Amazonian utopias and suffragette sisterhoods" (Selden, 141). Writers such as Elizabeth Robbins and Olive Schreiner belonged to this period

3. Female Phase (1920-): This is the last period and began from 1920. The third phase is the phase of self-awakening and self-discovery. Now woman writers specifically focused on women's writing and women's own experiences, emotions and ordeals as a woman instead of adopting male models of writing. They also discovered new modes of writing which suited for the expression of exclusive female experiences. Women writers such as Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson belonged to the female phase.

Feminist criticism is broadly divided into two categories; feminist critique and Gynocriticism.

1. Feminist Critique: Feminist critique studies women as a reader. Here women read literature produced by male writers. It studies the ideologies underlying literature and literary theories. It exposes the stereotypical images of women in Literature. It also unearths neglected, suppressed, obliterated women writers in the literary history by male critics. Feminist critics argue that the portrayal of women in literature is not authentic as this portrayal is presented by men from their own point of view. In short, this portrayal of women is what men think women are. It is a man's conception of what a woman should be. Men look at women from their point of view and even teach women to look at themselves from men's point of view. So it exposes such false depiction of women in literature, films, culture and other popular media.

2. Gynocriticism: Gynocriticism studies women as producer and creator of literature and arts. It studies the problems of female creative writers. Gynocritics develop new methods of studying women writers rather than adopting the models created by male writers. It also adopts theories of structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and Marxism for its

purpose. Women must free themselves from male literary tradition and discover the women writers buried in the past and create a separate literary tradition of women writers only. Women must use literature to express their own thoughts, experiences and feelings and emotions. Gynocriticism emphasizes that women should not rely totally on theories developed by male writers about literature and art. Instead, they should develop their own theory according to women's creativity and female experiences. Women should develop their own language suitable/ proper to express female experiences, emotions and feelings.

Virginia Woolf (1882 to 21941) is one of the most important feminist critics of 20th century. She continually wrote about the problems faced by women throughout the history. Her essay *Shakespeare's sister* examines how women faced social, cultural and economic problems to realize their literary ambitions. Their literary dreams were thwarted at every stage by patriarchal society and male domination. She begins the essay by saying that there is very little about lives of women in the history. In fact, women do not have control over their lives. She questions what would have happened if Shakespeare would have a very talented, gifted and imaginary sister like himself. Probably, she could not have gone to school and never got any type of education. Nobody would have encouraged the literary talent and ambitions. Her parents could have forced her to marry at the early age to man of their choice. If she could have resisted her parent's marriage proposal, she would have been blackmailed emotionally or given physical punishment and forced to marry at the very young age to boy of their choice. Suppose, she would have gone to London like Shakespeare to realise her literary ambitions, everybody would have poked fun at her literary ambitions. After trying hard and not getting any opportunity to realise her literary ambitions in London, circumstances and utter poverty could have forced her to commit suicide.

Room of One's Own is another seminal book in feminist criticism. The book discusses problems faced by women who want to be a creative writer. The title of the book is very significant as it indicates the general thesis of the book that if a woman wants to be successful creative writer she must have her own room, a private space where she can write. If woman wants to own her room, she must have financial freedom and independence. Woolf further argues that women didn't have such financial freedom and hence they were unable to realise their literary ambitions. If they do have creative genius and talent they were kept away from education and hence financial freedom and independence. In case a woman overcame such hindrances and difficulties and became a successful creative writer she was harassed by the society. She would have not got any recognition from the society. She explains how women were denied any opportunity for education while their male counterparts got every opportunity to get education and develop their creative ability. Woolf argues in her book *A Room of One's Own*:

All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon 1 minus point a woman must have money and room and her own room if she is to write fiction; and that it as you will see lives the great problem of true nature of women and the true nature of fiction on solve this. . . I have if I lay bare the ideas the prejudices that lie behind this statement you will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction (Woolf, 4)

In another essay *Profession for Women*, she discussed in detail the trajectory of women's profession. She says that one day women will achieve economic and social independence and equality, then they would fully realise their creativity and nothing will stop them from expressing their thoughts and emotions.

Mary Ellmann's important book *Thinking about Women* (1968) is precursor of what today we know as sexual politics. She is an important figure in early political phase of feminist criticism. The book analyses sexist stereotypes of women in literature and other forms of popular culture in detail. She introduced the term phallic criticism in feminist criticism which indicates male centred nature of literary theory and criticism in western world. Ellmann in the book has criticized this tendency and how women have responded to this tendency in various ways. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is another Landmark book in the history of literary criticism and theory. The title of the book refers to Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. In the novel Bertha Mason was locked in Attic by her husband as Monstrous women. In this book they trace the history of women's literature. They examined the women's representation in the history of literature and conclude that women were either represented as angel in the house or monster by the male writers. They were represented either at the most beautiful or pure as angel or are demonic and uncontrollable as a monster. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women must trace and obliterate these images of women by male writers because women writers have wrote under the influence of these images. They must free themselves from this influence by killing these images of women either as angel or demon. If they are successful in doing this, only then they can give expression to genuine women's feelings and female experiences. Apart from its reactionary nature the book unearthed a distinct female literary tradition. The book started a new movement for the appreciation of women's writing and many new women writers were discovered who were obliterated and suppressed by male literary tradition. Raman Selden comments on significance of the book in following words:

The early gynocritical text which has most impressed me is Mary Ellmann's *Thinking about Women* (1968). She belongs to the early political phase of modern feminism but anticipates more subtle development. Her main contention is that Western culture is utterly permeated by what she calls 'thought by sexual analogy' - a widespread application of gender stereotypes to virtually everything in the universe including art. She utterly attacks phallic criticism. . . manliness in art. (Selden, 143)

Juliet Mitchell is also one of the most important figures in the feminist movement and she initiated Political Feminism. As a rule feminist critics hated and discarded Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis as anti -feminist. Juliet Mitchell has shown the usefulness of Freud's theories of psychoanalysis reworked by Jacques Lacan for feminist criticism instead of seeing it as an instrument of patriarchy. The best known work of Juliet Mitchell is *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and women* (1975). In this book she has proved utility and relevance of psychoanalysis to Feminist movement. She says that unconscious and sexuality are not biological facts but are given social constructs. She has also reinterpreted Jacques Lacan's work to show that the concepts of masculinity and femininity

are generated by the discourse and language. Raman Selden comments on Juliet Mitchell contribution to feminist criticism in following words:

Juliet Mitchell, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975) defends Freud arguing that 'psychoanalysis' is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. Freud, she believes, is describing the mental representation of a social reality, not reality itself. (Selden, 146)

As can be seen from above discussion, Feminist Criticism has come a long way from its initial stage developing newer theories and accommodating developments from other fields such as post-structural theories and psychoanalysis. In the beginning it was reactionary in nature and was content to expose the stereotypical images of women in literature by male writers. Gradually it focused more and more on women's experiences and women's writings. It is still a developing field and there are new developments with newer feminist critics and thinkers.

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