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Feminist Voice and Protestation in Literature

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Abstract

Feminist voice and protestation in literature has been the natural outcome of the woman's suffering in the patriarchal way of life. Its concern supports the feminist goals of defining, establishing and defending equal civil, political, economic and social rights for women. It often identifies women's roles as unequal to those of men – particularly as regards status, privilege and power. In this paper, an attempt has been made to pick up threads of feminism by way of recapitulating its historical perspective and theoretical nuances, and weave insights on the latest trends in feminist literary criticism.

Keywords

Feminist literary criticism, Historical perspective, Theoretical nuances.

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Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women...Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.

-Barbara Smith, 1979

Feminism is a relatively recent word. It was first coined in France in the 1880s as *feminisme*. The term combined the French word for woman, *femme*, and *isme*, which referred to a social movement or political ideology. In other words feminism stands for a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place.

A critical turning point in the history of feminism occurred during the political tumultuous 1960s under the banner of “women’s liberation.” in the west. Women’s liberation championed both women’s equality with men in work and politics and women’s difference from men within areas of reproduction and sexuality. In this way the competing strains of equality and difference began to converge. Of course feminism as a global movement has spread since 1970 but the first public declarations that describe ‘women’ as a distinct social category with unequal status date from before Aphra Behn. In matters of theory, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) are still treated as classic texts.

An important precursor in feminist criticism is Virginia Woolf who emerged as the main spokesperson for women's cause in the early decades of the twentieth century. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf narrates as to how angry she was at being debarred from an Oxbridge library, because “ladies were only admitted if accompanied by a Fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction” (9). Woolf describes how men socially and psychically dominate women and how the experiences of women are distinct from men. She argues that the material impoverishment of women’s lives accounts for their lack of creative expression. Not to speak of the poor, even the middle class and upper class women have an affluent lifestyle but no control over, or ownership of money. Woolf believes that women’s domestic and professional isolation is the culmination of their material and ideological domination by men in which women collude. She says, “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses

possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (37).

A much more radical critical mode was launched in France by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) based on Sartre’s existentialist philosophy. The title *The Second Sex* sums up de Beauvoir’s argument that society sets up the male as a positive norm and woman as the negative, second sex or ‘other’. This insight is in some ways analogous to Virginia Woolf’s notion of ‘woman as mirror’. In Simone de Beauvoir’s words, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine” (295).

Likewise in America, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was recognized as one of the central works of the modern women's movement. In the book, Friedan defines women's unhappiness as ‘the problem that has no name’. According to Friedan, women have been encouraged to confine themselves to the narrow roles of housewife and mother, forsaking education and career aspirations in the process. Friedan attempts to prove that the feminine mystique denies women the opportunity to develop their own identities, which can ultimately lead to problems for women and their families.

Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) is yet another landmark in the history of the women's movement. The work portrays marriage as a legalised form of slavery for women, and attacks the systematic denial and misrepresentation of female sexuality by male-dominated society. She once again takes up a theme that she covered thirty years ago in *The Female Eunuch* in her latest published book *The Whole Woman* (2000). She tries to counteract the widespread feeling of complacency when she argues that no victory has been won and in fact feminism has been sidetracked and the woman question is far from answered.

In America, modern feminist literary criticism began with Mary Ellman’s account of female stereotypes in the works written by men and also subversive points of view in some of the writings by women in her book *Thinking About*

Women (1968). “I am most interested in women as *words*”, writes Ellman in Preface to the book. She comprehends almost entire experience at all levels by means of sexual difference what she labels as ‘thought by sexual analogy’. She counts the eleven major stereotypes of femininity as presented by male writers and critics as: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy and finally ‘the two incorrigible figures’ of the witch and the shrew. Even more influential is Kate Millett’s polemical and hard-hitting *Sexual Politics* (1969). The title of this influential study - “Sexual Politics” has now become part of the standard vocabulary of the feminist writing. ‘Politics’ refers to power structured relationships, arrangements whereby the one group controls the other group of persons. Feminists like Kate Millett take the patriarchal structure of our society as the starting point. The fundamental factor being that our society is pervasively patriarchal- that is, it is male centered and controlled, whereby males rule females as their birthright. It is organized and conducted to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. Ideologically, from the very beginning, women are so conditioned that they accept the subservient role of domestic service and attendance upon infants and cooperate in their own subordination. She represents Western social arrangements and institutions as covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. According to Millett, the most basic concept in feminist theory, which explains the subordinate status to women in phallogocratic culture, is the distinction between the biological sex and the socially constructed gender. Sex is biological and gender is a social imposition. Conceptually, sex means the biological sex of a child whereas gender is the culturally and socially produced behaviour assigned to that particular category of human beings into which the child is born. Under the patriarchal set-up, a set of different role prescriptions is meant for the male and the female sex. The male is supposed to imbibe a set of ‘masculine’ traits such as aggression, tenacity, intelligence, ambition, dynamism, force and efficacy. The female is expected to inculcate a set of

'feminine' traits such as passivity, ignorance, acquiescence, docility, obedience, affection, kindness, virtue and ineffectuality. Millett's fundamental conviction is that women's oppression derives not from biology but from the social construction of femininity.

The books that first began to define women's writings in feminist terms were Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1975), on English and American novels of the past three hundred years; Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), on major women novelists and poets in England, America and France; Elaine Showalter's, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977); and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) and *No Man's Land: The Place of Women Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988). All these books strive to define a distinctively female tradition or 'subculture'.

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) identifies a female subculture in which fiction by women constitutes a record of their experience. She defines three phases of literary development: the 'feminine' phase (1840-80), during which women wrote mainly in imitation of masculine models, but with distinctive feminine concerns; the 'feminist' phase (1880-1920), during which women formulated specific feminist protests and demands; and the 'female' phase (1920-present) during which women's writing moves increasingly towards self-discovery, the exploration of an inner space of female experience. The notion that, in contemporary society, female identity is routinely described in motifs of sickness and insanity is the key idea put forward by Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness* (1972). Chesler says that women's mental illness is a likely result of sex role stereotyping and that when women rebel and refuse gender norms consciously or unconsciously, they are regarded by society as examples of madness and psychological deviance. In their monumental study, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) Gilbert and Gubar present an incisive account of the major women writers of the nineteenth century such as Jane Austen, Mary Shirley, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. The massive volume offers a full theoretical account of women's literary activity. According to dominant patriarchal ideology, literary activity is considered fundamentally a male activity and the women writer has a rough time coping with the consequences of such a phallogentric myth of creativity. As a result the women writer suffers from debilitating anxiety of authorship. She starts thinking it as a monstrous and unwomanly activity. The monstrous counter figure to the heroine, typified by Bertha Rochester, the mad woman in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is projected in some sense as the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar extend their study on the battle of the sexes and sexual linguistics further by examining the works of twentieth century writers in yet another monumental work entitled, *No Man's Land: The Place of Women Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988).

Susan Brownmiller has made a major contribution to feminist theory with her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975). She argues that it is sexual violence, specifically rape and threat of rape, which enables men to control women. Like Brownmiller, Susan Griffin argues in *Rape: and the Power of Consciousness* (1979) that rape is the 'all-American crime' and she traces the metaphors and actual practices of rape in archaeology of masculine violence. Another notable American theologian who has pioneered radical feminist philosophy is Mary Daly. In her well-known major book *Gyn / Ecology: The Meta Ethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), Daly argues that male dominance relies on sexual violence throughout history and in all cultures. Mary White Stewart in her book *Ordinary Violence: Everyday Assaults against Women* (2002) argues that violence against women is a direct outcome of political and economic decisions supported by a cultural ideology of female inferiority. The cultural practices being practised in different parts of the world such as female genital mutilation and circumcision, bride burning, sex slavery, 'honor crimes' and female infanticide are different forms of violence against women which, according to her, are acts of terrorism against women.

Whether concerned with the literary representations of sexual difference, in terms of masculine or feminine values, or with the exclusion of the female voice from the institutions of literature, criticism and theory, feminist criticism has established gender as the fundamental category of literary analysis. Despite diversity in approaches, the main objective of feminist critics is to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices and to examine social, cultural and psychosexual contexts of literature. Feminist critics study sexual, social, and political issues once thought to be outside the study of literature. According to K. K. Ruthven, the central hypothesis of feminist literary criticism is that “gender is a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse” (9). But within this school, feminist criticism can be divided into two distinct varieties. The first mode is concerned with woman as a reader who analyses writings by male authors to see how women characters are portrayed. Elaine Showalter calls this kind of analysis the ‘feminist critique’. The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with ‘woman as writer’. For want of an available term to describe the critical practice, Elaine Showalter coins the term ‘gynocritics’. For “gynocentric” studies, Showalter identifies four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psycho-analytic, and cultural, each defining and differentiating the qualities of the woman writer and the woman’s text.

According to Elaine Showalter, “Until very recently, feminist criticism has not had a theoretical basis; it has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm” (308). The reason for the increased prominence of theoretical queries for feminist criticism since 1975 is the conglomeration of various schools of critical thought from other countries. Marxist feminists focus on class along with gender as a crucial determinant of literary production. It is noteworthy that leading English feminist critics such as Mary Jacobus, Rosalind Coward, Michele Barrett, Juliet Mitchell, and Cora Kaplan combine Marxist theoretical interest in the production and ideology of literature with feminist concerns for women’s writing. Black and Third world women writers call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics. French feminist theory looks at the ways that ‘the feminine’ has been defined, represented, or repressed in the

symbolic systems of language, metaphysics, psychoanalysis, and art. French feminist theory has its base from Neo-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida, and the structuralist critic Roland Barthes. All these theoreticians have played an important role in directing feminist concern to the study of language. According to them all western languages, in all their features, are utterly and irredeemably male-engineered, male-constituted, and male-dominated. In other words, all share a common opponent - masculine thinking. But they envision different modes of resisting or moving beyond them. They all consider the western culture as fundamentally oppressive, as “phallogocentric”; that is, it is centered and organized throughout by implicit recourse to phallus both as its supposed “logos”, or ground and as its prime signifier and power source. Women are excluded from men’s world of phallogocentric order on account of their lack of a penis. Man’s claim to centrality has been supported not only by religion and philosophy but also by language. Symbolic discourse – language, is another means through which a man objectifies the world. Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous have identified a difference between men and women in their use of language. They go on to emphasise that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men, have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or themselves. To evade this dilemma, Irigaray and Cixous have suggested that one of the ways in which women are able to challenge the effects of a patriarchal symbolic order is by writing a language of their own. If they can speak about their sexuality in the languages it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site of difference) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be combated. Helen Cixous posits the existence of an incipient “feminine writing”- *écriture féminine* which has its source in the mother, in that stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language. Julia Kristeva posits a “chora”, or prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal, unsystematised signifying process, centered on mother, that she labels “semiotic”. This process is repressed as we acquire the father-controlled language that she calls “symbolic”. The translations of

important works by French feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, and Luce Irigaray are now more accessible to Anglo-American Feminist scholars.

Feminist criticism differs from other contemporary schools of critical theory in not deriving its literary principles from a single school of thought. Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics and deconstruction have all provided feminist critical theory with important analytical tools. In other words, feminist literary criticism has taken in its fold all these critical approaches. What looked like a theoretical impasse has been actually an evolutionary phase. The difference lies only in shifting the emphasis. In the words of Showalter,

The emphasis in each country falls somewhat differently: English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. (311)

With regard to reader- response theories and feminist criticism, Patrocínio P. Schweickart, in her essay “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading” (1986), traces the recent history of feminist accounts of the woman reader, where there is a resistance to androcentric readings or textual strategies. This has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers. According to Schweickart,

To put the matter theoretically, androcentric literature structures the reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader. For the male reader, the text serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal. (533)

Judith Fetterley gives the most explicit theory to date about the dynamics of the woman reader's encounter with androcentric literature. In her book, *The Resisting Reader* (1978), she attacks the writers whose works were ‘canonised’ in literary departments throughout America – Henry James, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner. According to Fetterley,

... the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the immasculation of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny. (124)

Whether concerned with male or female texts, feminist criticism is positioned in the larger struggle against patriarchy. Both types of feminist readings i.e. of the male texts and the female texts aim at producing women's culture and literary tradition overcoming patriarchy.

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