

# Feminist Literary Theory & Criticism: Some Points

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- ❖ Women's struggle against social oppression has a long history, but the Feminist literary theory as a specific, organized school of critical practice has flourished out of the self-conscious, Eurocentric literary-cultural movement of women writers and critics during the 1960s against discrimination and oppression of women in patriarchal social system and their naturalized representation in mainstream, canonical literature and art.
- ❖ Feminist literary criticism is generally categorized into three 'waves' or phases depending on their respective traits and tenets. British novelist Virginia Woolf is arguably the most significant writer associated with the First-Wave Feminism which, however, predates and prepares the ground for the more rigorous and theory-oriented Second-Wave Feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. In such non-fiction books as *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) Woolf surveys the history and social context of women's literary production, and critiques the hegemonic power dynamics operative in patriarchal society. Abjuring for herself the tag of a 'feminist', Woolf claims gender-identity to be a relative and reversible social construct, and promulgates the notion of 'androgyny' as a gender-neutral sexual ethic that should be adopted in all literary as well as socio-economic discussions. She also advocates for an exclusive, self-conscious writing practice by women that would explore female experience in its own interest. The other most influential figure associated with this wave of feminism is Simone de Beauvoir whose book *The Second Sex* (1949) distinguishes between sex and gender, marking the latter as a socio-political imposition, and critiques the varied forms of subjugation and oppression of women in patriarchal social system. Her journal *Questions féministes* (1977-'80) marks the shift from the first wave towards the second wave of feminist literary movement.
- ❖ The Second-Wave Feminism, originated and developed chiefly in France and America, is more rigorously theoretical in its conceptualizations of feminine experience, sexual difference and the politics of reproduction in the domain of literature. Such critics as Kate Millett, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, Germaine Greer, Toril Moi and Luce Irigaray seek to theorize, in different ways, the nuances and impacts of sexual difference on basis of biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious psyche, and socio-economic conditions. The feminist critics of this phase frequently resort to Marxist, Freudian, Lacanian and Foucauldian discourses to substantiate their own arguments against patriarchal hegemony and conditioning of women.
- ❖ Kate Millett's seminal book *Sexual Politics* (1970) describes patriarchy as "a political institution", and locates the cause of women's oppression in economic inequality and systematic indoctrination enforced by prevalent patriarchal practices of conditioning and socialization through which certain masculine values and conventions are normalized so as to shape feminine experiences accordingly.

- ❖ American critic Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) propounds the idea of ‘gynocriticism’, *i.e.* an exhaustive and exclusive historical critique of the literary productions of women writers and their socio-economic, psychological and ideological determinants. This kind of criticism seeks to trace and define the development of feminine consciousness and expression of female sexuality in literature, and hence, tries to bring to light and reinterpret women’s writings that had either been hitherto neglected or been altogether hidden from readership.
- ❖ Showalter traces three distinct phases in “the lost continent of the female tradition” in literature: the first, the “feminine” phase, spanning roughly from 1840 to 1880, includes such writers as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot whose writing style conformed to, imitated and internalized the dominant male/patriarchal societal and literary ethics and mores; the second, the “feminist” phase, spanning from 1880 to 1920, includes such radical writers as Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner whose writings voiced protest against male/patriarchal values and ethics while advocating utopian, separatist models of female sisterhood and society; the third, the “female” phase, spanning from 1920 onwards, includes such writers as Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson whose writings are more self-consciously expressive of female experience and evocative of exclusively female consciousness.
- ❖ Hélène Cixous in her celebrated essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976) propounds the notion of *écriture féminine* as an exclusively feminine discourse for positive representation of femininity by subverting the phallogocentric/masculine symbolic language and creating new identities for women. According to Cixous, formulation of *écriture féminine* necessitates women to put their bodies into their writing, to write freely about their female experiences in ways of their own, ignoring and refuting the grammatical, semantic, ethical and axiomatic constructs and norms of the phallogocentric language.
- ❖ Other significant books pertaining to the Second-Wave Feminist Criticism are: *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975) by Juliet Mitchell, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) by Toril Moi.
- ❖ What is often designated as the Third-Wave Feminism refers to the more socially and politically oriented form of feminist movement in the USA during the 1990s. It has little to do with literature and criticism, and differs from the first two waves of feminist movement in its sole emphasis on such social issues as intersectionality, sex positivity, gender-equality, women empowerment, rape and sexual harassment. Principal activists of this phase of feminist movement are: Rebecca Walker, Anita Hill, Jennifer Baumgardner and Eve Ensler.

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❖ References:

- 1) *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* by Peter Barry (MUP, 2008),
  - 2) *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* by Raman Selden *et. al.* (Pearson, 2011),
  - 3) *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* by Margaret Walters (OUP, 2005),
  - 4) *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory* edited by Simon Malpas & Paul Wake (Routledge, 2006).
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