

Feminist Literary Criticism: A Paradigm of Matriarchy in Literature

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Feminist literary theory underpins literature from matriarchal perspective revolting against prototype patriarchal ritual i.e. established dogmatism, superstition, close-eyed religious propaganda, language engineering and so forth. It questions the textual politics of dissipating womankind in literature. It shatters long-cherishing outlook of gender inequality, gender politics, power relation, sexual objectification, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping and so on. In this connection, this theory sees women along with their experiences, thinking, language, position and role playing, cultural conditioning, diction, and above all, matriarchal assertion in literature. Feminist literary criticism has been generated from feminism and the basic aim of the theory is to investigate and trace out how female characters have been positioned in literature compared with male characters in terms of social and biological factors of different ages of the past started from antiquity. Feminist literary theory has also deconstructed texts from two different perspectives i.e. text written by men and text written by women. This paper attempts to evaluate feminist literary criticism as a subtle machinery or paradigm of matriarchy not only in *avant-garde* but also in old texts of literature.

Keywords: Avant-garde, feminist literary criticism, feminism, matriarchy, patriarchy, androtexts, gynotexts, psychoanalysis, écriture feminine

Introduction

From antiquity to *avant-garde* literature, it has been made quite clear that women are directly consumed negatively as mere “Others”. Historically, considering class and race, literature has tended to subordinate or marginalize the position of women and this has happened in several ways. Since the fourteenth century, writers have been debating whether women are virtuous or evil. They have been coining women as bearing original sin and making responsible Eve for the fall of human kind from the Garden of Eden and from Divine grace. Aristotle declared (as cited in Selden, 1997) that “the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities and St Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an “imperfect man” (p. 121). Women are made submissive in literature because of social values, established traditional rules and customs, superstition, closed eyes religious dogmatism, faradism and so forth. The dominant cultural conservatism and stereotype literary slogan of a particular time are

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also important barriers towards women's full-fledged portrayal in literature. Feminist literary criticism first attacks this sort of established social norms and attitudes to women in literature and the main issue of interest is, to what extent the experiences and voices of women are presented in literature. As Rayan (2002) rightfully opines feminist literary criticism studies literature by women for how it addresses or expresses the patriarchy of women's lives and experience and it studies the male-dominated canon in order to understand how men have used culture to further their domination of women.

Feminist literary criticism also asks crucial questions such as can a male writer adequately represent women characters or female experience? On the other hand, if language generally and the institution of literature are male-dominated, then can women writers break out of these restrictions to articulate a genuinely female consciousness? The study assesses feminist literary criticism as a movement to establish matriarchy in literature against long established patriarchy from different perspectives.

Feminist Literary Criticism: An Overview

Feminist literary theory is a new movement, perspective, phenomenon, or outlook towards women in literature. It is the women's movement, part of the other movements of our time for a fully human life that has brought this forum into being; kindling a renewed, in most instances a first time interest in the writings of women. Linked with the old, resurrected classics on women, this movement in three years has accumulated a vast new mass of testimony, of new comprehensions as to what it is to be female. Inequities, restrictions, penalties, denials, leeching have been painstakingly and painfully documented.

Feminist literary criticism has been generated from the feminist movement or third wave authors (1970 onwards). Contemporary feminist literary criticism begins as much in the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970, as it does in the academy. Its antecedent go back much further. Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (1927) is often considered as the earlier text but Inanna, a text written 2,000 years before the Bible that presents the fate of a Goddess who questions sexual discourse. According to Barry (2010), the feminist literary critic of today is the direct product of the women's movement of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense, the women's movement has always been cruelly concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot or a spin-off from feminism which is remote from the ultimate aims of the movement, but as one of its most practical ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

Feminist Literary Criticism: Matriarchy of Literature

Though, feminist literary criticism is a discipline of feminism which emerged in 1960s, but it's not insolubly time-bound, rather it is a two folded perspectives-time and tenure because the theory not only studies the post 1960s literary text but also the pre 1960/s published text. Feminist criticism is asking new questions of old texts and the goals of feminist criticism can be summarized as follows-

- (a) to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing
- (b) to interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored from male point of view
- (c) to rediscover old text

- (d) to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective
- (e) to resist sexism in literature and
- (f) to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style

To analyze text, feminist critics underpin a crucial set of distinctions between the terms “feminist” “female” and “feminine”. As Toril Moi (1985) explains—the first is a political position, the second a matter of biology, and the third a set of culturally defined characteristics.

The representation of women in literature was felt to be one of the most important forms of “socialization” since it provided the role models which indicated to women and then, what constituted acceptable versions of the feminine and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists point out that in the nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner, which decides her ultimate social position and exclusively determines her happiness and fulfillment in life or her lack of these.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s, the major effect went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural ‘mind set’ in men and women which predeceased sexual inequality.

Then in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mode changed. Firstly, feminist criticism became much more eclectic, i.e. it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism, Marxism, structuralism, linguistic and so on. Secondly, it switched its focus from attacking male version of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing lost or suppressed records of female experience. Thirdly, attention was paid to the need to construct new cannon of woman’s writings by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

Showalter (1999), for instance, described the change in the 1970s as a shift of attention from androtexs (books by men) to gynotexs (books by women). She coined the term gynocritics’ meaning the study of gynotexs, but gynocriticism is a broad and varied field, and any generalizations about it should be treated with caution. Therefore, the subject of gynocriticism is, the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition.

Showalter also detects in the history of women’s writing a feminine phrase (1840-80), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a feminist phrase (1880-1920), in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained’ and finally a female phrase (1920 onwards) which look particularly at female writing and female experience.

According to Cuddon (1999) “Feminist literary criticism questions the long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies (a kind of male conspiracy), patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature. It attacks male notions of value in literature—by offering critiques of male authors and representations of men in literature and by privileging women writers. In addition, it challenges traditional and accepted male ideas about the nature of women and about how women feel, act and think, or are supposed to feel, act and think, and how in general they respond to life and living. It thus questions numerous prejudices and assumptions about women made by male writers, not least any tendency to cast women in stock character roles” (p. 315).

Feminist literary theories share certain assumptions and concepts and by which individual critics explore the factor of sexual deference and privilege in the production, the form and content, the reception, and the critical evolution of works of literature.

There are several schools of thoughts of feminist literary criticism. For example, French feminist critics have been concerned with the theory of the role of gender in writing. They have been influenced and manipulated by several theories such as post-structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction etc. French feminist literary theory has been deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, especially by Lacan's (1966) reworking of Freud. According to Freud (1933), the female child, seeing the male organ, recognizes herself as female because she lacks the penis. She defines herself negatively and suffers an inevitable penis envy. He also opines that penis envy is universal in women and is responsible for their "castration complex", which makes them as home masques rather than a positive sex in their own right. Earnest Jones was the first to dub Freud's theory phallogocentric but Mitchell (1975), on the other hand argues that psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of the mental representation of a social reality itself.

Simone de-Beauvoir is considered as the mother figure of feminist movement in France who emphasizes on socialism to enhance woman's right in all sphere of life. Her epochal work "the Second Sex" questioned the whole position and role of women in society and was a critique of women's cultural identification. She says "one is not born, but rather becomes a women... it is the civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 330). Beauvoir says that women's idea of herself as inferior to man and dependent on him and realize that the world is masculine on the whole, those who are fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it are men (Beauvoir, 1953).

Milton's (1667) lines 'He for God only, She for God in him' could well be cited as an example of the most universally held assumption that man's purpose in life is to save God, the state, society, while women's purpose is to serve man. "Man as seen as the norm, women as seen as the other."

French feminist critics have been interested in a critique of language. They maintain that all or most Western languages are male-dominated and male-engendered and that discourse is predominantly *phallogocentric* as Derrida puts it. They are thus concerned with the possibility of a women's language and of *écriture féminine*, i.e. *mea women's writing* (Cixous, 1976).

In America, feminist criticism began with Ellman's *Thinking about Women* (1968) a witty and at times scathing analysis of the ways women are represented in literature by men. In 1969, Kate Millet published *Sexual Politics*, in which she depicts how power relations work and how men manipulate and perpetuate male dominance over women referring such writers as D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller and so forth. Gilbert et.al. (1979) published *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and Nineteenth Century Imagination*. This famous monumental write up examines about the typical motifs and patterns of women writers in the 19th century. One of the main arguments is that these writers choose to express their own female anger in a series of duplicitous textual strategies whereby both the angel and the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman, are aspects of the author's self image, as well as elements of her treacherous anti-patriarchal strategies. We can get an example of such psychological duplicity in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* where Bertha Rochester is portrayed as madwoman. Such a figure is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage.

American feminist critics examine texts based on its theme, motif, and characterization. They accept the concept of literary realism, and treat literature as series of representation of women's lives and experience which can be measured and evaluated against reality. They see the close reading and individual explication of individual literary texts as the major business of feminist criticism.

British feminist critics have been primarily concerned with the thematic studies of writings by and about women. English feminist criticism is socialist in orientation and closely associated with cultural materialism or Marxism.

Feminist literary criticism traced out those writings which have been considered great literature contains patriarchal ideology and almost entirely written by men for men. Typically, the most highly regarded literary works focus on male protagonists- Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tome Jones, Macbeth, King Lear, captain Ahab, Huck Finn and so on who embody masculine interest. To these male, the female characters are marginal and subordinate (Abrams, 2006).

Conclusion

Feminist literary criticism has tried to dissipate patriarchal attitude in literature and patronizes matriarchal assertion in literature. The feminist literary criticism aims at overthrowing those social practices that lead to the oppression and victimization of woman lack, stock and barrel. It targets at making women the subject of her own story and not the object of male desire and male satisfaction. According to this movement, women must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history by her own. Feminist literary criticism refuses to accept the image of woman as portrayed by male writers and it looks at woman in literature from woman's point of view. The knowledge, men acquire of women is wretchedly imperfect, superficial and will always be so until women themselves tell all they have to tell.

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