

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Feminism in Literature: A Concise Critical Insight

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### Abstract

Feminism is the most well-known movement for women to gain rights equal to those of men. Women all over the world can now attend the same educational institutions as men, hold the same professions, and express thoughts and ideas comparable to those of men. The first and second waves of feminists were predominantly Western white middle-class women, whereas the Third Wave includes women from various countries, cultures, and religious backgrounds. This paper is a concise critical insight of Feminism in Literature.

Key words- Feminism, Equality, Feminist Movements, Feminism in India.

Feminism is a socio-political movement that advocates the rights and equality of women by critically examining and challenging conventional gender roles and entrenched social norms. English literature, encompassing a wide range of genres and historical periods, has been profoundly influenced by feminist thought, and feminist literary criticism has played a crucial role in reshaping the interpretation and evaluation of literary texts. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* explores the obstacles faced by women in both literary production and social life, emphasizing the necessity of financial independence and personal space for women to fully realize their creative potential. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, widely regarded as a foundational feminist text, interrogates the construction of womanhood and exposes the historical marginalization of women,

encapsulated in her assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents the story of a determined and self-reliant protagonist who challenges restrictive social conventions in her pursuit of autonomy and self-respect, foregrounding themes of love, independence, and personal agency. Together, these works offer diverse feminist perspectives that deepen readers' understanding of gender relations, societal expectations, and the ongoing struggle for equality and empowerment.

Literature enables people, especially women, to express their experiences and viewpoints in a creative and powerful way. Through narratives, poems, and autobiographies, literature offers a space for underrepresented voices to be acknowledged

and affirmed. By telling their stories, women have managed to reveal the truths of their lives, confront oppressive structures, and encourage unity among readers. Feminist authors have employed their writings to reveal the injustices and disparities encountered by women, emphasizing the restrictions placed on them by society. Through challenging and overturning conventional stories, literature unsettles the established order and prompts readers to scrutinize current power dynamics. Literature has served as an essential instrument for education and awareness-raising within feminist movements. Writings about feminist theory, history, and activism have equipped individuals with knowledge and insights related to the wider feminist movement. Literature has enabled critical conversations, assisting individuals in comprehending the systemic aspects of gender inequality and offering a basis for collective action.

Two of the most significant figures in any conversation about the strong defence of women's fight for equality are i) John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and, ii) Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Both works uncovered the complete injustice of maintaining the oppression of women. The development of feminism as a literary movement can be categorized into the subsequent stages: First-wave feminism, which spanned from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to World War II and focused on obtaining fundamental civil rights such as the right to vote and own property; Second-wave feminism, which continued from the conclusion of World War II until the rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1980s and emphasized attaining workplace equality, safeguarding reproductive rights. Third-wave feminism, which includes racial justice, LGBT rights, and class oppression within the feminist perspective, aims for equality for all women.

The 20th century experienced considerable progress in feminist literary criticism, especially during the second wave of

feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. This era was characterized by the release of significant works such as Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). This time frame solidified feminist criticism as a rigorous and varied discipline, broadening its range and methodological strategies. Today's feminists also exhibit greater diversity. Liberal feminism focuses on equality between men and women, supporting legal and social changes to reach this aim. It concentrates on matters such as equal chances in education and work, reproductive rights, and political representation. This approach encourages the belief that individual rights and freedoms are crucial for attaining gender justice, and it aims to emphasize and correct the inequalities encountered by women in different areas of life. *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) analyzed the household roles designated to women in mid-20th- A notable contributor is Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949). Radical feminists examine how literature perpetuates patriarchal beliefs and aim to reveal the methods by which women's oppression is made to seem normal through societal stories. This perspective highlights the necessity for a complete transformation of society to eradicate patriarchal control and support women's freedom. Marxist feminists analyse how literature mirrors and sustain capitalist and patriarchal ideologies. French feminism advocates radical forms of women's writing that challenge masculine language and patriarchal discourse, encouraging women to express themselves beyond traditional symbolic structures. In contrast, American feminism promotes critical rereading of literary texts to challenge male dominated narratives. Cultural feminism celebrates biological and emotional differences between men and women, viewing women's qualities as valuable and nurturing. Ecofeminism links the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature, opposing patriarchal control and domination. Material feminism focuses on women's material conditions, labour, and economic power,

seeking liberation through improved living conditions. Moderate feminism adopts cautious positions on feminist ideals. Postcolonial feminism highlights the experiences of non-Western women, addressing colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and resistance.

Feminism has played a significant role in shaping the interpretation and analysis of literary texts by questioning prescribed gender roles, exposing patriarchal ideologies, and foregrounding marginalized voices. Feminist literary criticism examines the representation of women in literature and seeks to identify, critique, and dismantle long-standing biases and stereotypes embedded in literary traditions. In American literature, feminism has exerted a profound influence, with numerous works engaging feminist concerns, addressing gender inequality, and challenging conventional social norms. Literary texts have provided a vital platform for women writers to articulate their lived experiences, social critiques, and aspirations for gender equality. Notable feminist works in American literature include *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Literature has also played a crucial role in feminist movements by serving as a powerful medium for disseminating ideas, raising awareness, and questioning dominant social structures. By the 1990s, women gained increased visibility and agency not only in the United Kingdom but also across the globe. Women increasingly accessed education, entered diverse professions, and asserted intellectual and creative autonomy comparable to that of men. While the first and second waves of feminism were largely shaped by Western, white, middle-class women, the third wave expanded to include voices from diverse nations, cultures, and religious backgrounds.

Feminism in India has been around since the Vedic period. In that time, there was no gender bias in India. Women were highly respected and honoured by the male members of their families. Gender discrimination in India

began in the time after the Vedic period and continues today. An ancient lawgiver of Hinduism, Manu says in Manusmriti,

पिता रक्षति कौमारे  
भर्ता रक्षति यौवने  
तनयास्तविरभावे  
न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति (Manusmriti 9.3)

Translation is as follows, "The father looks after her during childhood, the husband protects her during youth, and the sons take care of her when she becomes old. Woman is never fit for freedom". Unlike the feminist movement in the West, India's movement began with men and was later joined by women. However, by the late 19th century, they were joined by their wives, sisters, daughters, students, and others impacted by efforts like those for women's education. It was only at the end of the century that women became involved. The list of the supporters of women's rights is extensive - some names include Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshav Chandra Sen etc. Feminism in Indian writing can often be seen as a very deep and complex idea, which has been carefully managed in limited situations over time. The history of feminism in India can be split into three phases: The first phase, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, began when male European colonizers started to speak out against the social problems like Sati. The second phase, from 1915 until India gained independence, saw Gandhi include women's movements in the Quit India movement, leading to the rise of independent women's organizations. The third phase, after independence, has focused on equal treatment of women at home after marriage, in the workplace, and their rights in political parties. The long and difficult struggles of women, the tough fight for the idea of equal pay for equal work, and the ongoing fights for women's rights against gender inequality. The feminist situation in India has a different approach. Indian society has always been very structured. The various levels within the family are based on age,

gender, and order of birth, as well as good and friendly relationships, or within the community based on caste, education, job, and ties to those in power, have been upheld very firmly.

Feminism in Indian English novels is not a new idea. Over the years, many new authors have entered the literary world and have successfully built a strong following. Indian women writers expressing their thoughts in English include a range of individuals, such as Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Sarojini Naidu, Arundhati Roy, and Shashi Deshpande. These female Indian writers showcase an amazing variety of themes and styles that poetry and novels can provide. Each writer, in their own way, has been successful in contributing to a shared voice that highlights the independence of women. Feminist topics have also been explored by writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das, Anita Nair etc hold an important place in Indian English literature by women. In the 1990s, India became a well-known nation for literature as many women writers started their careers during this time. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anuradha Marwah Roy focused on realism as the main theme in their books. The list of novelists also includes well-known names like Bharati Mukherjee, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Gauri Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabvala, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy etc. Many women novelists in India have investigated women's experiences to create an identity that isn't forced by a male-dominated society. Therefore, the idea of growing up from being a child to becoming a woman, known as the *Bildungsroman*, is a repeated method. Some notable examples are Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's first novel *To Whom She Will* (1955), her later work *Heat and Dust* (1975), which won the Booker Prize, and Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973).

Most Indian readers, both men and women, read the novels written by Indian female authors with specific expectations. They seek a sense of "Indian-ness" in their stories. Only Indian women novelists can deliver

feminist messages in a way that resonates culturally. Women writers have played an important and significant role in improving the quality and amount of Indian English fiction. They have included women's viewpoints and feminist elements in their novels. The works by female authors make up a large part of modern Indian writing in English. Women writers in India are progressing confidently and steadily, keeping up with global trends. They are known for their creativity, adaptability, and the unique local touch they bring to their work. Indian women writers examine female experiences and cover themes that range from childhood to full adulthood. These women writers believe that feminism means ending women's quiet suffering.

In conclusion, Indian women feminist writers have made important contributions to Indian English literature and society. Through their work, they have questioned the existing norms, supported gender equality, and encouraged women to claim their rights and independence. Through their writings, these authors have increased representation, tackled taboos, and shown the varied experiences of women in India. The writers have played a key role in promoting social justice, inclusively and actively engaging with the feminist movement. They have opened the door for a broader and more diverse understanding of feminism. They have highlighted the complexities of women's lives, addressing problems like violence, patriarchy, and identity. Their work has created a space for unheard voices. They have challenged societal norms, called for policy changes, and encouraged a sense of empowerment among women. Although these writers faced difficulties and criticism, they consistently expanded the limits of feminist storytelling. They have revealed the core of Indian literature and set the stage for future generations of writers and activists.

The influence of women feminist writers continues to resonate, shaping discussions around gender equality and social justice.

Literature, which is a broad field that includes various types and periods, has been influenced by feminist ideas, and feminist literary criticism has been important in changing the way we study and understand literary works. Their contribution remains an ongoing fight for justice, identity, and female empowerment. It is crucial to uplift the voices of these writers in the feminist movement positively.

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