

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

FEMINISM IN LITERATURE: INTERPRETATION OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION,
PATRIARCHY AND FUNDAMENTAL THEMES

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ABSTRACT

Feminist critics are agreeing at the point that there is a kind of conspiracy with the literary critics on the subordination of women in literature. They emphasize that institutions of literature and critical practice have been spoiled from the two concepts, the patriarchal ideology and the concept of gender. The male is all-in-all in the whole literature and female is a subservient, unimportant, marginal, and ordinary creature. It happens not only in literature but also in criticism and for this the literary artists and critics are biased by patriarchy and gender. So, the feminists challenged patriarchy, concept of gender and one-sided evaluation of literary output which establish their general ideology.

Keywords: Female, patriarchy, gender, literature, ideology, critics

The concept of Feminism, in general, has been concerned to an analysis of the trend of male domination in the society; the general attitude of male towards female; the exploitation and discrimination faced by females; the need for and ways of improving the condition of women; and, so on. In concern to literature, this movement has concentrated on the role played by literature to support gender discrimination as well as to oppose it; the reasons for lesser significance of the contribution by female writers in the literary tradition than that of the male writers; the difference in the ways in which works of male writers and female writers, respectively, have represented gender discrimination; and, the ways in which social conditions and literary traditions regarding gender discrimination have affected one another. The concept got proper identification in the literary field during 1960s. Before that, feminism was limited to the authorship of female writers and the representation given to women in literature with the help of female characters. The condition of

women in society, in general, got expression through the situations faced by fictional female characters and their responses to these situations.

The adoption of the concept by literature in a formal manner led to the study of all the aspects of human life; like social, cultural, educational, professional and financial; with an intent to expose the intentional and unintentional efforts of the society to maintain or intensify the effects of patriarchal superiority.

The evolution of feminism as a literary movement could be divided into following stages:

- *First-wave feminism*, which led from the 18th century until World War II and was centered on securing basic civil rights to vote and to own property;
- *Second-wave feminism*, which lasted from the end of World War II until the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the 1980s and centered on achieving equality in the workplace, protecting reproductive choice, and attempting to pass the ERA ;

- *Third-wave feminism*, which incorporates racial justice, LGBT rights, and class oppression into the feminist worldview and seek real, practical equality for all women.

Feminist criticism has been concerned not only with the depiction of women and men in a male-determined literary canon and with female responses to these images but also with another topic, women's writing. Women have had fewer opportunities than men to become writers of fiction, poetry, and drama but even when they have managed to write, men sometimes have neglected their work simply because it had been by a woman. Feminist have further argued that certain forms of writing have been especially the province of women- for instance journals, diaries, and letters; and predictably, these forms have not been given adequate space in the traditional, male-oriented canon.

Two most prominent figure in any discussion of the powerful defence of women's struggle 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 books revealed the utter injustice in keeping women oppressed by advancing arguments that were essentially biased and exposed the pretentious nature of social constructions. Mill believed that 'the liberty of the individual is absolutely necessary for the development of the society' and viewed that women's freedom as an essential condition. He pled led for their right to enter any profession or trade and their right to vote. Mill regarded family as a corrupting influence rendering girls miserable and abject the boys selfish. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earliest crusades for the emancipation of women devoted all her life and energies to protest against institutions that crushes women's identity. She strongly put forward that women were exploited and victimised everywhere by virtue of their sex which was sought to be supported by gender-biased men construction of false scholarly pleas. On her ideas it is not difficult to find influences of the thoughts of William Godwin, a radical thinker whom she married and John Locke whose commitment to reason and 'natural behaviour' gave strength to her opinions.

The third significant work is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* which constitutes two-part lecture delivered by her in two colleges in Cambridge. She dwells at length upon various things that a woman in English society has been deprived of simply because she is woman, even the entry to the library of the university, if she is not escorted 'properly'! It is this image of woman's dependence on man for almost everything sustained by the society which she protests against. It is a beautiful book written in a style that gives expression to the submerged agonies of a wounded self. Woolf's book represents the perception that "there is something wrong with society's treatment of women".With time feminism became a potential ideological-political force revealing as its strength a number of diverse ideologies and theories that represented various angles of looking at the problem.

Fundamental Themes of Feminism:

- I. **Female Aesthetics:** Female aesthetics, being emerged by the feminist critics of different countries, has become one of the themes of feminist criticism. It is based on a universal view-a universal woman nature and culture. This general notion was developed because of a special social phenomenon aroused in America, Germany, Italy, and Russia. The feminists who were against the patriarchy, notion of canon formation in literary creation and criticism, formed a distinct movement 'Women's Liberation Movement'. The supposition of female aesthetics is that there is distinctive literary awareness of female which is distinct from the male.The movement collects momentum because in the period of 60s, there is the development of 'Black Literature' (Negro Literature) in U.S.A. which provided the insights for the development of female aesthetics. According to Black Literature, the Negro has a distinct awareness from the Whites. In this way, 'female aesthetics' is the 'female literary consciousness'as expressed in literature or 'the female sense of beauty'.
- II. **Gynocriticism:** In the theory of female aesthetics we find that it is based on a universal concept, a universal woman nature and culture. On the contrary Gynocriticism regards woman

different, in terms of nature, race, culture and nation, and due to this, they cannot be universally studied. It addresses to practical problems only and it is more forward. According to 'gynocriticism' it is a peculiar feminist reading-criticism of female's texts. The main object of 'gynocriticism' was to read the literature which is being written by female and to present what characterises the literature of woman as woman.

- III. **Canon Formation:** Canon formulation is the reformulation of the literary canon. It was needed to change the marginality of woman. The growth of "female aesthetics" and gynocriticism laid to elaboration of a distinct canon of female writing-literature by woman. Emily Bronte, George Eliot and Jane Austen are excellent female writers throughout the late 18th and 19th century. The effort of feminist critics concentrated in the period of 70's which results to the idea of woman tradition in literature. Many of the female writers and writings were analysed in depth, presenting the individuality of woman writers and their writings.
- IV. **Female Subject or Female Identity:** In the concept of feminist criticism, the subject is undoubtedly the female author and the subject has a personality. This type of idea, the idea of the character or the author as a personality undertake the belief of the 'unity of the self'. There is something called 'unified self'. The subject has a 'substantive or unified self'.
- V. **Gender Theory:** In the later part of the 80's, one more theme, gender theory was developed. In fact, some of the male critics are talking over the feminist point of view. In this respect, K. K. Ruthvin and his work "The Feminist Literary Studies" are significant. This coming of male critics to the horizon of 'feminism' causes a kind of dispute between the female and male critics of 'feminist criticism'. Because of this entry of male critics into the feminist criticism a slackening comes. Some of the female critics are trying to discover the nature of masculinity in literature. This is a new development. In this respect, "Between Men" (the subtitle-"English

Literature and Male Homosocial Desire") of Eve Sedgwick is noteworthy in the period of 80's. It is a study of male homosociality in literature. It reveals how the masculine patriarchal ideal gets reflected in literature. Being a gender discourse, it is a new approach to study. In late 80,s, post - colonial group supported a part of the process for coloniality'race' is the distinguishing thing and here 'gender' is the most significant factor of study. Now literature came to be studied with the expression of both, expression of femininity and expression of masculinity.

Feminist criticism made possible to the world that there is a tradition of female creative writing which has its own right for existence. One more contribution is that feminist criticism has developed a critical practice which might borrow from other critical practices. But it is different in colour ; besides it is anti- patriarchal in practice. It lays bare the woman subject in literature.

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