

## FEMINISM AND FEMINIST CRITICISM

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Feminism is nothing but a revolt against the unequal treatment women has faced down the ages. It questions why women have played a subordinate role to men in human societies. At its core, feminism is the belief in full social, economic, and political equality for women. They were always treated as lower to men in society and were confined inside the house with domestic duties such as rearing children and doing all the household chores. As a result they had no time for other things. They were not allowed to educate themselves. They could not own their father's property like their brothers. On top of that they could not participate in social activities. Philosophers, writers and thinkers like Aristotle, Rousseau, Milton, Alexander Pope to name a few also overlooked the role of women in society. The French Revolution which brought tremendous changes and inspired men did nothing for the welfare of women. The Enlightenment for the first time provoked the women to think of their status. This rejection started growing in their mind and gradually the feminist movement started. The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. This movement viewed the images of women depicted by literature, and saw it vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence.

But it took time for the movement to gather momentum. For as late as the twentieth century women were fighting for their rights. This happened that too in the western world in the most developed countries of the world like USA, UK, France and New Zealand. Feminism largely arose in response to Western traditions that restricted the rights of women, but feminist thought has global manifestations and variations. The roots of feminism can be traced through classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society. These books include

### **Mary Wollstonecraft's**

1. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), which discusses the importance of education for women.
2. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which discuss male writers like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau; how they portrayed women in their novels.

There were **male contributions** to this tradition of feminist writing like,

1. **John Stuart Mill**, "*The Subjection of Women*" in (1869)
2. **Friedrich Engels**, "*The Origin of the Family*" in (1884)
3. **Olive Schreiner**, *Women and Labour* in (1911)

**Virginia Woolf's**, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which vividly portrays the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood.

**Simone de Beauvoir's**, *The Second Sex* (1949), which has an important section on the portrayal of women in the novels of D. H. Lawrence.

**Toril Moi**, essay in *The Feminist Reader*, her book *Sexual Textual Politics* (1985), The concern with 'conditioning' and 'socialization' underpins a crucial set of distinctions, between the terms 'feminist', 'female', and 'feminine'. As Toril Moi explains, the first is 'a political position', the second 'a matter of biology', and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'. In the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism.

The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialisation', since it reconstituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. The focus of interest is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfillment in life, or her lack of these.

Feminist literary criticism studies literature by women as to how they address or express the particularity of women's lives and experiences. It studies the male dominated canon in order to understand how men have used culture to further their domination of women.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. Necessarily, the criticism which undertook this work was combative and polemical. Then, in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. *Firstly*, feminist criticism became much more *eclectic*, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism – Marxism, structuralism, linguistics and so on. *Secondly*, it focused on exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. *Thirdly*, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women's writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

**Elaine Showalter** next important name in this movement, described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from '**andro-texts**' (books by men) to '**gynotexts**' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexts, but gynocriticism is a broad and varied field. The subjects of gynocriticism are, she says, '*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 phase (1840-80)**, in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards;
- **feminist phase (1880-1920)** in which a radical and separatist positions are maintained.
- **female phase (1920 onwards)** which looked particularly at female writing and female experience.

Scholars, critics and academicians have divided the study of Feminism into waves for a better understanding of Feminism and Feminist Criticism

**First Wave of Feminism (1792- 1949)** : It happened in the big countries of the Western World for the voting rights of women .It did not reach the smaller countries .As it was a fight for voting rights and property rights so its objective was political.

**Second Wave of Feminism (1949-1980)**: Women continued their fight against the treatment of women .Again happened in the western world like the first wave and was limited to the white women only focusing in the unequal treatment meted out to them and the discrimination they faced in their social life, family life, and workplace. It highlighted issues like marital rape, abortion and pregnancy.Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) when translated to English 1953 influenced Betty Friedan who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* which created a political movement. Two types of Feminism developed: Liberal Feminism focused on the individual aspect of women. Radical Feminism focused on the root i.e. Patriarchy .So by the restructuring of the social system existing in society the problem can be solved.

**Third Wave of Feminism (1980-2000)** included all women, white, black and brown. Feminism started its entrance into the micro level, revolt against domestic violence and all forms of inequalities in society.

**Fourth Wave of Feminism (2000 onwards)**: Important book by British journalist Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women* is primarily about this wave. This wave has the world wide #MeToo campaign where women started sharing their experiences and how they were sexually harassed. Cultural Feminism, Eco Feminism, Redstockings, etc. are variants of this wave of Feminism. It is in process and going on giving rise to different variants of Feminism

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