

FEMINISM

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In many different religions, women have been victims of male-domination. Basically every society is male-dominated and several restrictions have been imposed on women by such societies. Many philosophers have expressed these thoughts alike along with several writers like **Rousseau who suggested that women should be educated** in order to be useful to men. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, the situation was not much different and women had little or almost no 'say' outside their respective homes. In course of time women became conscious of their injustice, exploitation and suppression which caused into the rise of Women's Liberation Movement in the beginning of the twentieth century.



- A political movement was started by women in England in 1903 and its main objective was to get voting rights for women. It was purely a political movement and the foremost amongst the suffragettes were Emmeline Pankhurst (1857–1928) and her daughters, Christabel (1880–1958) and Sylvia (1882–1960). As all Women's Suffrage Bills were rejected, the Women's Social and Political Union came into existence in the same year. The members of the union protested against the government and resorted to increasing militancy like cutting telephone lines, damaging public property, organizing huge meetings and processions, etc. Emily Davidson, one of the protestors, in 1913, committed suicide by throwing herself under the King's horse at Derby. However, all protests were crushed mercilessly by the government; militants were sent to prison; their hunger strikes were dealt with by crude forced feeding that nearly killed some of them.



The First World War provided an opportunity for women for the first time to work in the areas reserved for men only. This helped in changing the public attitude towards women's capabilities, and after the end of the war the British Government sanctioned the Bill reserving votes for certain categories of women. Surprisingly, the French women did not receive the voting right until 1944 and the Swiss women obtained it in 1971. Today, in most of the countries, including India, women have all the rights which are enjoyed by men. They have full voting rights; they can contest any election, study any subject, choose any career, apply for any job or do almost anything they please.



Women's Liberation Movement affected social, political, economic as well as literary fields in most of the countries. It had its powerful impact on literature which helped in the emergence of Feminist literature along with Feminist Literary Criticism. Though Feminist literature and Feminist Literary Criticism came into existence in the middle of the twentieth century, the seeds were sown in the eighteenth century. It was Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote a book - **A Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792** which is regarded as the manifesto of Feminism. In her article Wollstonecraft demanded that women should be treated as human beings. According to her, 'delicacy' is not women's virtue. There were few learned men who supported this view. **John Stuart Mill** was one of the supporters who, in his article - **The Subjection of Women (1869)**, condemned the domestic slavery of women and further suggested that power of earning is essential for the dignity of women. Margaret Fuller, an American writer, in her book- **Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845)**, expressed views alike.



It is to be noted that **Women's Liberation Movement** made women conscious of their rights. It made them aware of their predicament and injustice. Women became educated and education made them conscious of their selves. Some of them began to fight to bring about reforms in marriages and divorce laws. Feminist Literary Criticism is closely interrelated with the movement for social, cultural, economic freedom of women. Reading as a woman, writing as a woman and responding to the way woman is presented in literature is the prime objective of Feminist Literary Criticism.



An important precursor in Feminist Literary Criticism was **Virginia Woolf** who wrote **A Room of One's Own (1929)**; and numerous other essays on women authors. She has written on the cultural, economic and educational disabilities within what she calls a patriarchal society which has prevented women from realizing their productive skills and creative abilities. Virginia's work expresses antagonism against the denial of the opportunities of education and lucrative employment to women. She focuses on the issues relating to feminism in the material conditions that prevailed in her times.



The foundation for feminist studies was laid in France by **Simone de Beauvoir**. An intensively critical mode was launched by her in the book, **The Second Sex** published in **1949**. She pointed out that women constitute half of human race and still have to occupy subordinate position in the society. According to her, women are identified as merely negative objects; and men wrote about women in literature in a stereo-typed derogatory manner. **Simone de Beauvoir** being radical feminist suggested that women should avoid marriages and stop begetting children; instead, first, they should obtain financial independence.



In America modern Feminist Criticism was inaugurated by **Mary Ellman's *Thinking about Women* (1968)**. **Kate Millet** published her relentless book ***Sexual Politics* in 1969**, in which she makes scornful attack on patriarchy, that is, the rule of the father. She thinks that patriarchy has distorted the status, dignity and role of women in society. Millet distinguishes sex from gender clarifying that sex is biological whereas gender is a cultural construct. In her **book-*Sexual Politics***, by politics she means the mechanisms which express and enforce the relations of power in society. According to her, society everywhere manipulates in such a way that the supremacy of man and the subordination of woman is maintained in every field.



Another book which sensationalized the movement was written by **Betty Friedon** who was also an American feminist. The book is titled as *Feminine Mystique* in which Betty states that many women who are married and play important roles of devoted wives and loving mothers do look happy; but in reality they are not, because they do not have independent identities of their own. **Betty Friedon**, in her second book, *The Second Stage* (1981), emphasizes her view that humanity can survive only if women make certain compromises.



Since 1969 there has been an explosion of feminist writing. Socialist feminists asserted that women's inferior status is due to the unequal distribution of wealth. The underestimating of women's position aligns feminism with that of Marxism which defends the underprivileged. Feminism even recalls to the mind the ideology of the Black who criticized the White women. Thus there were different groups of feminists but their objective was one and the same.



One of the famous feminist critics, **Elaine Showalter** remarks that the modern feminist movement displays the urgency of religious awakening. It is widely held that one's sex is determined by an anatomy; whereas terms like masculine and feminine are largely decided by patriarchal bias. According to Simone de Beauvoir, *“One is not born but rather becomes a woman. It is a signification as a whole that produces a woman. The masculine is identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational and creative; whereas the feminine is identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional”*.



The masculine ideology prevails throughout great literature which has been written up till now by men for men. Typically highly regarded classics focus on male protagonists. **For instance, Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Othello, Tom Jones, Huck Finn, etc.** These classics embody masculine traits and express manly feelings. The role of women in such books is marginal and subordinate; and they are represented as complementary to men. Such works lack independent female role models and are greatly occupied with masculine interests. Even critical comments of such works of literature are gender-biased. Modern feminists want to justify to female point of view. They want to avoid sexual bias and identify and focus on recurrent images of women in literature especially created by men. Modern feminists nowadays concentrate on what Elaine Showalter calls *'Gynocriticism'*—criticism which exclusively concerns itself with production, motivation and analysis of writing by women on women; and developing a specifically female framework for dealing with such works.



Gynocritics are chiefly concerned with feminine subject matters in literature written by women like the world of domestic life, special experiences of being pregnant, giving birth to a child or nurturing a baby, the relationship between mother and daughter or between woman and woman, etc. Gynocritics believe that women feel and think in their own peculiar way as their **languages, passions, emotions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, expressions, gestures**, etc. are different than that of men. Feminist writers refuse to accept the images of women as portrayed by male writers thinking that these images of women lack authenticity. **Carlo Christ**, one of the feminists, rightly remarks that women have not experienced their own experiences. In this way modern feminist critics want to enlarge and reorder the literary canon.



Feminist studies have raised the status of many female writers. Many of them are engaged in thematic studies of writings by women and about women. Patricia Meyer Spacks commented upon the English and American women novelists of the last three centuries in her book *The Female Imagination* (1975). Ellen Moer, in her book *Literary Women* (1976), reviewed major women novelists in England, America and France. Elaine Showalter published her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) which is on British writers.



- Gynocritics seek to formulate a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and to develop new models based on the study of female experiences rather than adopting male models and theories. Gynocritics take into account the feminist research done in the field of anthropology, history, psychology and sociology in order to formulate their critical principles. The Feminist Literary Criticism involves the feminist as a reader offering different interpretations of the images of women projected in **the male-created texts**. It also involves the feminist as a writer to challenge the male gaze in literature and at the same time to rewrite, recast and recreate the male-created texts from the feminist perspective.



- By the mid of **1970s**, Feminist Literary Criticism was an international movement with a wide conflicting range of theoretical concerns. Feminist Literary Criticism has provided an opportunity to look at 'women' in literature from women's point of view. It is concerned with women as the producer of textual meanings with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature created by women. Feminism is said to have links with post-modernism. The French Feminist Criticism has been largely influenced by **Jacques Lacan's** interpretation of **Freud**; whereas Anglo-American Feminist Criticism has been deeply rooted in the socio-cultural setting. All the schools of Feminism have a common goal of restoring woman to her rightful place in literature.



THANKS

