

Review Paper**Feminist Literary Theory: An Overview****Nilofar Akhtar**

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Haldwani, (Nainital),**Abstract**

The present paper aims to analyze Feminist Literary Theory and find out its significance in contemporary criticism. This is done in three parts. The first part deals with feminism as a movement with its long historical background and its factual aspects. The second segment deals with the ideology or varied perspectives pertaining to the movement called feminism. It also delineates different facets of feminism as a plural term. The third part sums up the role of feminism in contemporary criticism and deals with theoretical developments, which have an immediate bearing on feminist literary theory.

**Keywords:** Feminism, literary theory, contemporary criticism, gender, hierarchy, patriarchy, liberation, equality

The present paper aims to analyze Feminist Literary Theory and attempts to find out its significance in contemporary criticism. This is done in three parts. The first part deals with feminism as a movement with its long historical background and its factual aspects. The second segment deals with the ideology or varied perspectives pertaining to the movement called feminism. It also delineates different facets of feminism as a plural term. The third part sums up the role of feminism in contemporary criticism and deals with theoretical developments, which have an immediate bearing on feminist literary theory.

**PART-1**

A very compressed definition of feminism by Delmar can be aptly quoted to support feminism as a movement and as a methodology. However, tight as it may be, it lacks incorporational characteristics and thereby fails to take up the core concept of feminism—the concept of revolution.

There are those who claim that feminism does have a complex of ideas about woman, specific to or emanating from feminists—it is, by no means absurd to suggest that you don't have to be feminist to support woman's right to equal treatment, and that not all those supportive of woman's demands are feminists. In this light, it can claim its own history, its own perspectives, its own idea but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copyright over problems affecting women. Feminism can, thus be established as a field (and this even if scepticism is still needed in the face of claims or demand for a unified feminism) but cannot claim woman as its domain (1986:13).

The definition of Delmar crosses the threshold of conventional concept of feminism as a movement of women, for women and by women the first written document witnessing the existence of the term 'Feminism' can be traced back to as far as 1871 when it occurred in a French medical textbook with reference to the stunted growth of sexual organs.

To describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as thus suffering from 'feminization' of their bodies (Fraise, 1995)

Alexander Dumas, a French writer and an anti-feminist in a derogatory sense to describe masculinity in woman first used the term feminism. It was also used as an expression of derogation for men who were effeminate. However, feminism as a movement, took off, long before the derived meaning of the term. Christine de Pisan (1364-1430?) is believed to be the first to hold strong feminist views. French feminism holds a longer past in terms of its origin. As Kelly John writes in her essay "Women, History and Theory":

If Petrarch can be called the first modern man, then, Christine de Pisan, the poet and author who introduced her countrymen Petrarch and Boccaccio to Parisian culture in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century is surely the first modern woman. (J.Kelly, 1984:64). Pisan's long debate on the question of female has come to be known as *quenelles' des femmes*. This quenelle theory, which was initiated by De Pisan was perfected in the hands of Mary Wollstonecraft. The pro-woman writers who emerged during this phase had three major concerns- 1) They were defenders of the woman's cause which made their writings highly polemical 2). They stressed on the need for equality of sexes regardless of biological notions of woman as inferior sex 3) they wrote vigorously against the atrocities meted out to women and gave way to their empowerment. Feminist traits were visible in the social,

religious and intellectual spheres of Europe during 17<sup>th</sup> century. A striking contrast could be perceived between the woman of the aristocratic class and the bourgeois society where the former became more suppressed and subdued as compared to their bourgeois counterparts who, very evidently, bore the marks of growing awareness and spread of education. Aristocratic women who observed celibacy were looked down upon as lesbians and could never get social acceptance for their isolation. Later 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a sense of resistance in women who refused to follow the dictates of men in family or in church. They revolted against the doormat attitude reflected by the patriarchal behaviour of men, which had hitherto, been mutely accepted as their fate. The seed of resistance which was sown during the 1700 saw its ripening in the nineteenth century; a century that turned not only the direction of feminist thought but also gave a new dimension to it. Feminist consciousness was not only gaining ground in society, but in politics as well. Feminists now came to know the fact that the most important means of acquisition of equality for women is their political empowerment. Right to property, right to liberty and above all, and the most crucial, right to vote- were some of the basic rights, which they could not afford to forego.

However, feminism as an organized movement could see clear light of day only after the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolution, signed at Seneca Falls (New York) in 1848. The Seneca Falls Declaration raised some very basic questions regarding women's right to equality and liberty. Continuing the movement a step further, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association. But much before that, the woman question was raised by the French Revolutionists and later on, discussed by Mary Wollstonecraft in her quintessential book *A Vindication of Rights Of Woman* (1792). In her controversial book, she brought forth those aspects of woman's abjection which were earlier, either been neglected or had been swept under the carpet by male chauvinists. For the first time, a free and full –throated voice representing woman's point of view was raised. Wollstonecraft, along with J S Mill succeeded in changing the trend of anti-feminist thought in society. J S Mill emerged later on the scene with the publication of *Subjection of Woman* (1869) and carried forward the movement which was later to be known as Feminism. Mill gave a concrete shape to his pro-woman views by introducing a bill to get woman's suffrage.

These individual efforts brought change in the society and the next century saw a paradigm shift in the outlook of society towards women. The task of woman's suffrage, which had been initiated earlier, was partially accomplished, thanks to the growing legal, social and political awareness among women. Twentieth century started as an age of revolt against oppression of rights and in favour of liberation. This prolonged movement was also the result of long suppressed grievances of women who had not only wanted to speak but had also wanted to be heard.

By now it had become clear that woman's liberation was not just a fad. It had come to stay. A realization dawned that behind the bizarre elements played up by the media by a serious reform movement. (Singh sushila.1997,19)

## PART II

In the introductory part of *Feminism* by Jane Freedman, the author debates over the concept of feminism as having a single meaning or a set of meanings. She goes on to the extent of coining the term 'Feminisms' to connote differences in perspectives among different feminist groups. She has, however, accomplished the task of definition, not by delineating the divergence in feminist perspectives but by picking out points of common characteristics--- the baseline to which goes as "Feminists concern themselves with woman's inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by woman because of their sex (Freedman, 2002, 01).

It will not be exaggerating to say that a state of present impasse in feminist criticisms due to the lack of '*exacting definitions and a suitable terminology*' (Showalter E1998,407).

Simply put Feminist criticism is reading, judging and writing a text from a woman's point of view. It is a protest against patriarchy. It is an attempt to review and rewrite literature of the past from woman's point of view. Feminism as a movement came to be known only in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was seen and defined in a different light before that. During 1890s the term referred to a favourable position to the rights of woman. During the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term was often, interchangeably used to describe 'the new woman'. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* the difference between the two sexes succinctly.

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers...a man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine (De Beauvoir, S.1984)

This statement by de Beauvoir brings forth the points of difference between man and woman as depicted in society and projects feminism as a philosophy which fights against the classifications of sexes and helps woman to secure their just position in society. According to feminists it is high time woman are given their rights which have been overdue since ages as it is very important that women are elevated from their subjugated state of being. According to Sushila Singh, the author of *Feminism: Theory, Criticism and Analysis*:

Feminism is a thought system, a point of view to recognize the world realities, a positivist holistic approach to life, a step towards sanity in human relationships, and perhaps the only mode of preservation of human existence on this planet.(Singh.S 45)

However, the line of demarcation between feminism and social reformation is very thin. It is commonly believed that whoever fights for woman's cause is a feminist. Strangely, Mahatma Gandhi and Raja Rammohun Roy are never branded as feminists though they fought for the upliftment of women. More than being socialist, feminist thought is humanist in outlook. Quoting Sushila Singh again on Virginia Woolf, an attempt is made to brief the definition of feminist and the humanist thought, which is inherent to it.

Virginia Woolf's *'Three Guineas'* is structured around three causes: first to prevent war by helping a Pacified society: second, building of a woman's college: and third, establishing a society dedicated to helping woman to enter the professions. To her the three causes are inter-related and might help to prevent war and eradicate fascism. Women have never made war (Singh. S).

This aspect of feminism has a universal bearing, which is the key force applied to the woman question. Moreover, seeing the gender perspective from the doctrine of *purushartha*, which has its roots in the patriarchal and hierarchal past of India would be an easy way to understand it better. In a patriarchal society, the subordinate position of woman is due to a variety of culture specific reasons which can be understood by studying the role of gender in structuring human society; their cultural, historical and ideological structures.

The gender perspective revolves round the famous dictum that Simone de Beauvoir gave in her book *The Second Sex, one is not born a woman, one becomes one*. Men and women have biological differences but these apart; placing them into some fixed categories creates the division between them. The superior sex has different roles and functions, which make woman inferior to men. Power relations have a key role to play in the allotment of social categories. Any study of feminism will be incomplete without viewing feminism as a methodology. Gender analysis is such methodology, which helps feminists to delineate the differences that a woman becomes a victim to, in society and in family, as well.

### Part III

There has been a lot of empirical research going on leading to more and more of theory up gradation and practicality into it. At the same time the 1970s has also seen a remarkable decline into the feminist movement especially in the west. There are political and social groups which stand against the very idea of being tagged as "*upfront feminists*". All this, due to the right leanings which challenge the perspective of feminist thought. Hence, the question- Has feminism died? It may seem a far-fetched idea but a sensible and rational reassessment should be achieved to ascertain its present status. The roots of feminist literary theory lie in the social and political activism. The fact that these feminist movements still have a very limited access, more so, in the developing countries like India Sri Lanka and Pakistan where right to equality is still a far-fetched dream for working class women and women coming from the marginalizes sections of the society. With new realities hitting in contemporary feminists must shift their attention to the unresolved issues of gender discrimination, gender sensitization, poverty, social and religious bias so that the concept of sisterhood and female fraternity further the feminist cause. Quoting from Freedman: "*external opposition and internal conflicts will undoubtedly continue, but ever malleable, sometimes contradictory, feminism itself is not likely to disappear.*" (Freedman,346) Feminist literary theory and movement have to be trotting across cultures, ethnic groups, races, and geographical regions to define and devise woman's roles, problems, issues and challenges.

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