

From the Angel in the House to Hero in #MeToo Movement: The Evolution of Feminism in Literature

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Abstract: Feminism has been a driving force for change in literature since 18 century. This essay offers an insightful look at the evolution of feminist theory through a literary lens. From the postfeminist thought from the Middle Ages onwards, the rise of second-wave feminism and maps its interventions across the twentieth century, to impact of postmodernism on feminist thought and practice, this article researches how female writers have used their voices to challenge societal norms and advocate for all genders' equality about rights, opportunities, and treatment. This study uses a qualitative research method that tries to analyze feminist research, whose conclusions offers a guide to the history and development of feminist literary criticism and a lively reassessment of the main issues and authors in the field. In conclusion, the evolution of feminism in literature has been a long and complex journey that has seen significant changes over time. In addition to providing women with a forum for self-expression, the feminist movement in literature has questioned social mores and supported the continuous struggle for women's rights. While there is still much work to be done, the advancements made thus far demonstrate the influence of literature in influencing how we view gender and fostering social change. These historical resources also serve as a steady source of inspiration for future advancements in women's emancipation, gender equality, and affirmative action.

Keywords: Waves of feminism, Literature, Social movement, Gender liberation

1. Introduction

The term "feminism" was coined in 1837 by the utopian philosopher and radical socialist Charles Fournier (1772–1837) as a reaction to the organized forms of activism for supporting women's suffrage. It consists of a number of social, cultural and political movements that take attempts for equal rights of men and women in terms of politics, decision making, career, and childrearing [1]. Taking nearly half of the global human population, women should be free to contribute to the building and construction of the world, but in fact are the victim of the oppression, marginalization and exploitation in the patriarchal societies. For example, America as colonies adopted the English system decreeing women cannot own property in their own name or keep their own earnings in 1769. In addition to this, all states pass laws which take away women's right to vote in 1777 [2]. However, as civilization continuously progresses and the female consciousness unremittingly awakens, women's positions in politics, the workplace, and at home have shifted tremendously over centuries, leading to their vital force in the development of society. UN Women reports that as of January 1, 2023, women head of state in 11.3% of countries (17 out of 151 countries, excluding monarchy-based systems) and

head of government in 9.8% of countries (19 out of 193) [3]. Compared to ten years earlier, when the numbers were 5.3% and 7.3%, respectively, this represents an increase. Nevertheless, while some disparities shrink, others persist. As an example, the 2020 United Nations World's Women report reveals that women are still underrepresented in STEM professions, accounting for just slightly over 35% of global STEM graduates nationwide [4]. In addition to this, the development of feminism itself today also faces some problems. Dietz points out that feminist thinkers themselves are engaged in heated discussions over the politics of recognition and what feminist citizenship means, as well as the connections between diversity and democracy, feminism and multiculturalism, and gender equality and cultural rights [5]. In summary, women still do not have the equal rights that they are due, and the feminist movement's current state of development has exposed issues and ambiguities. Therefore, the feminist movement requires further support and attention. To better accomplish the objective of women's independence and equality, it is imperative and meaningful to trace development of their historical origins to sort things out and to draw strength to move forward.

Particular, literature plays a crucial role in advancing feminism by offering diverse narratives that challenge and reshape societal perceptions of gender. For instance, research by scholars like Judith Butler explores how literary representations of gender can disrupt conventional binaries and highlight the fluidity of identities. Authors such as Toni Morrison, through characters like Sethe in *Beloved*, illustrate the enduring trauma of slavery through a feminist lens, emphasizing the intersectionality of race and gender. Additionally, the narrative style employed by authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* provides a powerful depiction of the Nigerian Civil War through the perspectives of women, showcasing their resilience and agency amidst conflict. The article of Brown also finds out Virginia Woolf uses free indirect discourse as a narrative device in *A Room of One's Own* to empower women [6]. These literary characters, works and narrative styles not only amplify women's voices but also critique patriarchal structures, inspiring readers to reconsider traditional gender roles. By engaging critically with these texts, scholars in literature and gender studies continue to uncover new dimensions of feminist discourse, contributing to ongoing conversations about equality and social justice.

This paper will use a qualitative research method to analyze the significant and intertwined relationship between literature and feminism based on some secondary data sources, like published journal articles, books and handbooks of renowned authors, websites that are related to feminism's development in history. Subsequent chapters will delve deeper and discuss the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of the four waves of feminism throughout that period, and further concentrates on literary characters and their works in response to those feminist movements. This intersectional approach recognizes the complexities and interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination and privileges, enriching the interpretation of literary works and amplifying diverse voices.

2. Four waves of feminism

Martha Weinman Lea first use "waves" in her 1968 New York Times article *The Second Feminist Wave* to demonstrate that the women's liberation movement was another "new chapter in a grand history of women fighting together for their rights". According to the study of Rosa, the so-called first wave lasted from the mid-19th century to 1920, focused on suffrage and legal rights; the second wave spanned the 1960s to the early 1980s, characterized by broader demands for social and cultural equality; the third wave emerged in the 1990s and addressed the diversity of women's experiences, including issues of race, class, and sexuality; and the fourth wave, beginning in the early 21st century, has been characterized by digital activism and intersectional advocacy [7].

2.1. The first wave: 1848-1920

2.1.1. Social background

First Wave Feminism is defined as the time period from 1848 to 1920. Although the original “wave” of female actions began in 1848 with the Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, this era was motivated by the French Revolution and the Abolitionist Movement. At this initial gathering, more than 300 female and male supporters signed the “Declaration of Sentiments”, declaring that women had the right to education and property, and suffrage, and that all men and women were equal. After then, the main goal of first wave feminism shifted to achieving women’s voting rights, which they reckoned as essential foundation to gaining more rights [8].

2.1.2. Figures and their contributes

Literature also incorporates elements of the suffrage movement. Few authors, like Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, applied their writing to promote women’s voting rights. Their writings concentrated on issues of gender roles, equality, and suffrage.

Especially, Virginia Woolf is widely regarded as the pioneer of contemporary feminist literary critique. She etched her name in history with her landmark contribution to feminism by publishing *A Room of One’s Own* in 1929 [9]. For some literature techniques, Woolf embraced a great deal of unconventional theoretical methods and discourses in *A Room of One’s Own* that were significantly different from those of patriarchal culture, including first-person perspective, metaphor, and stream of consciousness, which were significantly different from those of patriarchal culture. For the book’s topic, Woolf arguments on female independence around financial autonomy, space and privacy, women’s empowerment, and creative expression.

2.2. Second wave: 1963-1980s

2.2.1. Social background

The first-wave’s focus on women’s rights gathered momentum and took a radical turn in the post 1960s period. The second-wave of feminism is closely allied to the radical feminist protests and women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s. These women’s liberation movements emerged from socialist movements in post-war European societies such as protests against the French colonial war on Algeria and the American war in Vietnam, the student revolution of 1968, lesbian and gay movements and Black civil rights movements. These radical movements resented capitalism and imperialism, thus fight against their oppression and violence against all sectors of society in turn. Meanwhile, they cared about underprivileged and marginalized groups’ interests.

In addition to such activism, advancements in education also helped to lay the foundation for the second-wave. Female education rates have risen considerably since the mid-20th century. For example, the statistics from US Census Bureau in 2019 indicate that by 1980, women who had completed high school or college constituted 21% of the total population at this educational level in the United States [10]. While such data in 1962 was simply 9.2%, a significant increase can be seen. With enhanced access to higher education, women gained more and more knowledge to help them realize their self value outside their small family. And with the skills they gained, women were able to challenge traditional gender roles and pursue their own careers, which made a significant contribution to the feminist agenda of that era.

2.2.2. Figures and their contributes

Many writers have made remarkable contributions to the Second Wave process, and the following paragraphs will focus on standouts such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Angela Davis. Their works have challenged the traditional concepts of society from a philosophical perspective, explored the dilemmas and neglected desires of women's daily lives from a life perspective, and intersected feminism with anti-racism, expanding the breadth and depth of the second wave and contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender and social justice.

Although Simone de Beauvoir got her masterpiece *The Second Sex* published in 1949, its influence permeated the second wave. Her existentialist analysis of women's oppression as "the Other" challenged traditional gender roles and social constructs. *The Second Sex* provided a philosophical foundation for understanding gender inequality and was instrumental in shaping feminist theory and discussions during the 1960s and beyond.

Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is credited with igniting the second wave of feminism and considered one of the cornerstones of modern feminism [11]. In this work, Friedan exposes the plight of post-war American women, introducing the concept of "the feminine mystique" as the suppression of women's roles and the societal expectations that confine them. She coined the term "the problem that has no name", which brought to light the hidden struggles of suburban housewives, galvanizing a new wave of feminist activism and advocacy for women's rights. Her work sparked widespread enthusiasm among women for equal rights and contributed to the push for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and led to the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

As both a scholar and activist, Davis's book *Women, Race, & Class* (1981) offers a deep analysis at the intersection of feminism and anti-racism. By examining the contributions of African American women and the intersection of racial and gender oppression, Davis expanded the feminist discourse to include a broader spectrum of experiences and challenges. Her scholarship highlighted the importance of addressing multiple dimensions of identity in feminist theory and activism.

With the ebbing of second-wave, public yet saw feminists as grumpy, lonely and hateful of men. Such stereotype is so profoundly embedded in people's heart that current views on feminism are still influenced by this image. However, it also became the cornerstone for the third-wave's positioning.

2.3. Third wave: 1990s

2.3.1. Social background

First, the political settings. With the end of the Cold War, political environment underwent many dramatic changes, global politics gradually recovery from conservatism after early 1990s. While the importance of human rights and democracy in general has been emphasized, there has also been a growing focus on the rights and interests of minorities, which had been neglected for a long time, like labor rights and economic inequality. In addition to this, the growing activism of the LGBTQ+ and civil rights movements prompted the third wave of feminism to expand its focus from solely gender issues to broader areas of race, class and sexual orientation. In short, feminist concerns are both progressive and challenging in the context of conservative political shifts.

Second, let's delve into the financial background. With the deepening of globalization and the expansion of capitalism, neo-liberalism has had a profound impact on the economic system, changing the labour market and increasing economic inequality. Economic disparity is more pronounced for minorities and disenfranchised masses, especially women from marginalized environments. In response to these difficulties, the third wave of feminism attempt to address issues such as equal pay for equal work.

Finally, postmodern cultural transformation took place throughout this time period. The development of feminism was also impacted by this unconventional cultural activism, which led feminists to investigate, question and criticize the conventional gender characteristics and identity. Not to mention the boom of media and pop culture supplied effective means to advance feminist ideas. The term “intersectionality” coined by gender and critical racial theory expert Kimberlé Crenshaw to characterize the manner in which various oppressions overlap; also, Judith Butler maintained that gender and sex are distinct and that gender is performative. Their combined impact lay the groundwork for the third wave of feminism to accept the struggle for transgender rights as an essential component of intersectional feminism.

In summary, the second-wave’s apparent flaws, namely its lack of intersectionality and diversity, gave rise to the Third Wave. Third Wave Feminism, according to Crenshaw, aims to address intersectionality more thoroughly, i.e., the idea that gender and race are not “mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis... Those who are multiply-burdened... cannot be understood” when viewed through an exclusively prejudiced perspective [12].

2.3.2. Figures and their contributes

Bell Hooks, a feminist thinker and cultural critic, was well-known for criticizing contemporary feminists for their disregard for the situation of other underprivileged women [13]. Hooks examined the relationships between race, class, and gender in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), arguing that social justice and educational reform are essential components of feminist thought.

Shams notes that Butler’s groundbreaking theory of gender performativity was shaped by her poststructuralist critique of feminism [14]. Her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) challenged conventional gender roles and advanced a more flexible definition of identity. In his book, Butler argues that performativity is central to understanding gender and sexual constructs. This notion questions the core tenets of certain feminist theories and practices in relation to gender and sexuality, thereby arguing that these concepts cannot be reduced to naturalized heteronormative categories. The book has sold over 100,000 copies worldwide and has contributed significantly to the development of feminist studies and therefore queer theory [15].

In sum, the third-wave has broadened feminist discourse to encompass the rights and interests of marginalized groups other than women, arguing for greater inclusivity and more in-depth study of identity and power dynamics.

2.4. Forth wave: now

2.4.1. Social background

Digital networks and the internet has been cherished and valued during the fourth-wave [16]. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok made it easier and more accessible for the general public to communicate and share their ideas, thus allowing the feminist movement’s advocacy to be more visual and efficient. For example, these platforms have facilitated the rise of initiatives such as the #MeToo movement. Such activism enabled the feminist movement to spread widely and attracted public attention on a global basis. At the same time, the emergence of conservative forces and political polarization have raised awareness of issues such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment. In response to these challenges, the fourth-wave promoted restructuring and increased focus on marginalized groups. Ultimately, the fourth-wave expands on the third-wave’s focus on intersectionality by examining the ways in which different types of oppression interact, which includes giving greater attention to issues affecting people of color, transgender people, and other marginalized groups.

2.4.2. Figures and their contributes

According to Delao, there is friction between the various forms of feminism, and none of the movements they have sparked are monolithic [17]. Just as humanists often find that interfaith groups exclude others from their broader conversations, the feminist movement has been described as a megalithic boulder by white women who have won equality and rights with white men, pushing aside other marginalized groups in the name of a never-guaranteed “scalable power”. In response, Roxane Gay’s 2014 book *Bad Feminist* offers an authentic assessment of both pop culture and modern feminism. Her work explores the ambiguities and complexities of feminist identity and promotes a more diverse and inclusive definition of feminism.

3. Conclusion

In summary, this study highlights the pivotal role that literature has played in each wave of feminism, emphasizing its dual position as a catalyst and mirror of social evolution. The relationship between literature and the feminist movement is intricate. Literary works have been both chroniclers and promoters of the feminist movement.

The examined works show how authors actively engaged with and promoted the feminist movement while observing social change. For the start, the foundational texts of the first-wave laid the groundwork for women’s access to suffrage, while the radical literature of the second-wave challenged established patriarchal norms and broadened group scope of the activism. The subtle narratives of the third-wave addressed intersectionality, and contemporary feminist literature explores new dimensions of gender and identity within a global framework. Literature functions as an essential tool for awareness and education, possessing the power to shape cultural biases and political beliefs. By interacting with these texts, scholars and activists can delve deeper into the strategies and ideologies that have shaped the evolution of feminism across generations, thereby energizing future feminist fights.

Looking ahead, in the ear of globalization and period of big data, future research should focus on how new forms of media can influence global feminist literature and how literature shapes these media in turn. In addition, activists, scholars, and the public should draw from the legacy of feminist writers to build new perspectives and strategies for the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Due to its significance in directing future movements and preserving the accomplishments of past feminist activities, the interaction between literature and feminism will remain a dynamic field.

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