

The Evolution and Theories of Feminist Literary Criticism

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Abstract. Feminist literary criticism emerged as a prominent paradigm within Western literary research during the 1970s, with its principles being extensively applied to both linguistic and literary analysis. This critical approach focuses on women's experiences and encompasses the study of female characters and women's writing. It calls for a reevaluation of literary texts through a feminine lens and strongly challenges the misrepresentation of women in male-authored works. Additionally, it seeks to uncover a literary tradition unique to women, investigate female consciousness in literature, and examine the distinctive modes of expression and writing styles developed by women. It also denounces the suppression of female creativity under patriarchal cultural norms and promotes the development of a feminist mode of writing. Through contributions from various authors, this paper first discusses the development of feminist literary criticism across three historical periods, then identifies key concepts of feminist literary criticism. By reviewing the current state of feminist literary criticism, it offers insights for readers and contributes to the advancement of feminist criticism.

Keywords: Feminist Literary Theory, Criticism, Literary works

1. Introduction

Feminist literary criticism is a critical approach that employs feminist critical theories to analyze female literary works. Feminist scholars, from a feminist perspective, offer open and diverse interpretations of female consciousness, which is necessary for the construction of female literature and marks the awakening of female scholars' gender subject consciousness, as well as their distinctive thinking habits and different concerns. Feminist literary theory is a form of literary criticism and a feminist political movement that breaks away from the male-centered tradition in pursuit of their own gender rights. Feminists are "person[s] whose beliefs and behavior[s] are based on feminism" [1]. The history of feminism is divided into three waves: the first, second, and third waves of feminism from the 19th century to date. "Feminism emerged as a crucial force in the western world in the 1960s and has always focused on the significance of gender in literary creation and criticism, challenging the patriarchal society's traditions." Subsequently, a societal shift occurred, characterised by a feminist revolution that encompassed the struggle against racism and sexism. The phenomenon of the women's liberation movement gave way to a new form of feminist criticism, which developed as a consequence of the preceding social awakening [2]. Feminist literary criticism draws on various critical theories and experiences, and can be regarded as one of

the most innovative forces in modern critical theories. Its research objects include female reading, female images, and female writing. It demands a brand-new female perspective to interpret literary works and literary phenomena, denounces and criticizes the deeply-rooted male-centered cultural tradition, and advocates a feminist writing style. The development of feminist literary criticism has laid the theoretical foundation for the study of women's literature, expanded the new horizons of women's literature research, and promoted the prosperity and development of female writing. This paper aims to study the nature, origin, development and characteristics of feminist literary criticism, explore the development and progress of Western feminist criticism, and examine the influence of feminist criticism on contemporary literary concepts and cultural ideology. It not only has a positive impact on the construction of contemporary literary criticism theory but also plays an important role in promoting the development and progress of contemporary world cultural ideology.

2. The origins of American feminist literary theory

The roots of feminist literary criticism run deeper than most people realize. This form of criticism formally emerged in the 1960s, but examples of early feminist criticism can be traced back to medieval times. The advent of feminist activism witnessed the emergence of feminist theory in various disciplines, including literature research, theoretical philosophy and historical studies. This progression ultimately led to the establishment of Women's Studies programmes in both domestic and international contexts. The pioneering establishment of the first comprehensive Women's Studies programme at San Diego State College in 1970 marked a significant milestone in the academic landscape, paving the way for the development of similar initiatives across various institutions worldwide [3].

While it is true that one can find evidence of the long history of feminism in the works of Sappho and the "Lady Bath" in the Canterbury Tales, which mocked her five husbands, these positive portrayals of women are few and far between when compared to the number of texts that are hostile to women. According to prominent literary theorists, the notion of male creativity is not merely regarded as a valid form of power; rather, it is posited that male sexuality is the quintessence of literary talent. For instance, Aristotle recognized that women inherently lacked certain qualities, while Thomas Aquinas explicitly defined women as "incomplete human beings." Gerard Hopkins further argued that creative talent is "a character possessed only by men." This phenomenon can be attributed to the long-standing marginalization and subjugation of women in terms of their economic, educational, political, and social status.

It is not difficult to imagine that the early feminist movement could only germinate and survive in the cracks of male society. In the context of the Middle Ages, a period characterized by stringent ideological constraints, female monastic communities, particularly those adhering to the rule of recluse, functioned as crucial centers for women's empowerment. These communities not only provided physical and emotional refuge but also facilitated access to education, enabling women to become literate and to cultivate independent thought. During the turbulent 17th century, the evolving religious landscape and the influx of refugees and pagans into Europe provided women with greater opportunities for education and self-expression through missionary work in churches. By the close of the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* [4] in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which advocated for female rationality and challenged the prevailing male authority. During the 18th century, women's writing underwent a period of significant growth and development. Toward the conclusion of *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt makes a passing remark that has since become renowned: that the majority of eighteenth-century novels were authored by women [5]. During this period, female writers, including Mary Shelley and

the three Brontë sisters, significantly influenced the history of Western literature. The development of a female readership and the rise of female novelists were among the most significant events in 18th-century British cultural life. It is noteworthy that the ability to write, create, and read literature and art has always been accompanied by the cries and struggles of the women's movement. As a result, systematic feminist literary criticism has emerged.

The development of initial feminist literary theory, an intellectual project that flourished during the Women's Liberation and Civil Rights movements, primarily focused on the exploration of the interconnections between the experiences of reading and personal lives. A foundational work in the field of feminist literary criticism is Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which offers an in-depth analysis of dominant male writers and reveals a persistent pattern of gendered power dynamics characterised by misogyny [6]. *Sexual Politics* challenged the prevailing attitudes towards patriarchy and sexual violence that are commonly found in contemporary literatures. Millett's pivotal perspective was that written expression is innately shaped in relation to gender. This assertion is frequently disregarded or dismissed by conventional scholarly frameworks that adopt a non-feminist theoretical posture, which asserts a kind of literary immunity from the complexities and experiences that are characteristic of human sexualities. The objective of feminist literary criticisms such as the work of Millett was twofold: to posit a beneficial model of femininity in both artistic and practical settings; and to encourage the recognition of women's suppression.

3. The development of feminist literary criticism

3.1. History of feminism

According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker [7,8], the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The initial wave of feminism emerged during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The subsequent second wave of feminism unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s. The third wave of feminism, which is still ongoing, commenced in the 1990s and continues to the present day.

Feminism, defined as the belief in the political, economic, and cultural equality of women, has its historical origins in the formative periods of human civilization. The feminist movement is typically divided into three distinct waves. The first wave focused on property rights and the right to vote, while the second wave centered on issues of equality and anti-discrimination. The third wave, which emerged in the 1990s, emerged as a response to the second wave's perceived prioritization of white, heterosexual women.

3.1.1. The first wave of feminism

A broad historical perspective reveals that the initial phase of feminism, often termed "first wave feminism," encompasses the period preceding the nineteenth century, during which early expressions of concern regarding women's rights emerged. The French Revolution of 1789 is frequently identified as the catalyst for the initial concerted demands for women's rights. Moreover, the first feminist movement is typically regarded as having commenced in the latter half of the nineteenth century, reaching its zenith in the early years of the twentieth century. During this period, marked by the intensification of the industrial revolution in the Western world, there was a profound transformation in the socio-economic structure and in the attitudes and consciousness of the populace. This socio-economic and cultural shift engendered significant changes in the status of the two sexes. The primary objective of this movement was to advocate for women's right to vote, secure employment opportunities, and access education.

As women's self-awareness increased, feminists advocated for equality between men and women through the establishment of women's organizations, the publication of newspapers and magazines, the organization of rallies, the signing of petitions, and the holding of congresses, among other initiatives. They sought to achieve equal rights for men and women in the domains of politics, education, the economy, and marriage by enacting pertinent legislation. Sylvia Walby [9] is in agreement with the assertion that the initial wave of the feminist movement in Britain played a pivotal role in the transition from a "private" to a "public" patriarchy. This transition occurred through various means, including the struggle for the vote, access to education and professional opportunities, and the attainment of legal rights related to property ownership, marriage and divorce, among other things.

Mary Wollstonecraft [4] is widely regarded as the progenitor of the First Wave of Feminism. She authored the seminal work "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1790), in which she advanced the argument that the inaccurate portrayal of women and the erroneous aesthetic principles propounded by Edmund Burke would result in women acquiescing to the prevailing societal structure. "Therefore, of the manners of women, let us, disregarding sensual arguments, trace what we should endeavour to make them in order to co-operate, if the expression be not too bold, with the Supreme Being" [4].

3.1.2. The second wave of feminism

The advent of the second wave of feminism was inextricably linked to the political, economic, and cultural evolution of European and American societies in the post-World War II era. This movement resonated with the civil rights movement, the anti-establishment culture movement, and the anti-war movement of that era, and its overarching objective was the eradication of gender disparities.

In the contemporary historical context, women have advanced a series of demands and propositions, seeking to transcend their submissive and passive status as the "second sex" and the "other" within mainstream cultural values. These demands aim to disrupt the prevailing dichotomy between the two sexes, thereby facilitating the realization of comprehensive civil rights and authentic gender equality. The movement represented a deviation from conventional political principles. The movement challenges the conventional boundaries of the traditional concept of politics by advocating the slogan "the personal is political". This slogan champions women's right to autonomy over their own bodies and acknowledges the political nature of concerns such as sexuality, reproduction, marriage and family, and domestic work. The present system of governance, centered on male figures, must undergo a transformation to address the prevailing power relations and concerns within the political landscape.

In comparison with the initial wave of the feminist movement, the objectives and scope of this movement were considerably more extensive, encompassing rights and interests in numerous domains, including marriage, family, employment, political engagement, childbirth, and social welfare. Concurrently, the field of women's studies underwent a transformation, evolving into a discipline of professional standing. This development attracted a substantial number of researchers and students, contributing to a significant shift in the societal perception and status of women. The second feminist movement was characterized by its immense scale, its unparalleled scope, and its profound influence. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded, becoming the largest women's organization in the Western United States. Moreover, the proliferation of mass women's organizations worldwide significantly contributed to the struggle for gender equality and the promotion of the women's liberation movement.

3.1.3. The third wave of feminism

The third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s as a form of resistance against the inherent essentialism that characterized second-wave feminism. The text places significant emphasis on the concept of intersectionality, acknowledging that women's experiences are multifaceted and contingent on factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity markers. Third wave feminism is characterized by an intersectional approach, recognizing the interconnected nature of gender inequality with other forms of oppression, including race, class, sexual orientation, and disability.

Third wave feminism is characterized by post-structuralist and post-colonial theoretical overtones, with the aim of deconstructing the dominant theories of the second wave of feminism and shifting the focus of attention to issues that were previously ignored or trivialized by the second wave. Specifically, it emphasizes that women's issues involve multiracial, multireligious beliefs, multiethnic customs, multiculturalism, multisexual orientation, multiple values, and other issues. It advocates for the dissolution of the original feminist paradigm and the elimination of social gender roles and prejudices. Contrary to the prevailing focus of earlier waves of feminism, which centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women, third-wave feminists espouse a commitment to the inclusion and representation of diverse voices and perspectives. They challenge the notion of a single, universal feminist experience and emphasize the importance of individual agency and choice in addressing gender-based inequalities [10].

The term "Third Wave Feminism" was coined by Rebecca Walker [8] in her 1992 article, 'Becoming the Third Wave', which emphasized the necessity for a new wave of feminism that addresses contemporary issues. Walker's advocacy for a feminism that is inclusive of all women's experiences is characterized by her emphasis on the importance of race, class, and sexuality in discussions about gender equality. She has played a crucial role in raising awareness about the ways in which mainstream feminism often excludes women of color and other marginalized groups.

3.2. Different types of feminist literary theory

Western feminist criticism developed distinct schools as a consequence of historical and cultural differences. It generally divided into two distinct schools: the Anglo-American and French traditions. The Anglo-American school places a strong emphasis on social criticism and acknowledges the significance of women's cultural traditions. They identify and examine the works of women writers, endeavor to establish a model of women's literature from a feminist perspective, prioritize the initial starting point, dedicate themselves to the women's movement, and elevate women's personal experiences to a theoretical level. The women-centered perspective of criticism is the predominant approach of the Anglo-American school. A notable tendency within British feminist criticism is its inclination towards a Marxist framework, which accentuates the interplay between class and gender dynamics. This ideological orientation underlies the notion that literary analysis should be conducted with a focus on the production and consumption of individuals and the environment.

Conversely, the French school of feminist criticism emerged in the late 1960s, coinciding with a period of profound intellectual transformation. The French school, with its foundation in linguistics, emphasizes linguistic criticism and psychological construction, demonstrating a propensity to critically assimilate other critical trends. In contrast to the Anglo-American school, the French school demonstrates a stronger inclination to address women's issues from a philosophical perspective. The prevailing emphasis of French feminism is commonly categorized into two distinct

theoretical orientations: materialist feminism and psychoanalytic feminism. The former is concerned with the social and economic oppression that women endure, while the latter focuses on women's psychological experiences. These two approaches are often contrasted when analyzing women's experiences in patriarchal cultures.

Concurrently, feminist studies in France, the United States, and Britain are characterized by their distinct foci. French feminist criticism has been influenced by scholars such as Lacan and Foucault, and has demonstrated a keen interest in psychology, language, and the generative changes of language. In contrast, American feminist critics have focused more on the textual analysis of literary works and have reexamined the image of women in the works of male writers to expose their hidden patriarchal ideology. A central tenet of British feminist studies is the analysis of the specific historical environment in which women have grown up. These studies have also examined the political meanings of the survival status of women in specific historical periods. The overarching goal of these analyses is to advocate for the participation of women in the historical process, with the aim of promoting profound social change. Conversely, British feminist studies prioritize the examination of the historical context in which women were raised, the investigation of the political implications of women's groups' status within a particular historical era, and the promotion of women's involvement in the historical process to catalyze substantial social transformation.

In general, these schools were not entirely isolated; rather, they interacted and influenced each other. Regardless of the specific type of institution, these scholars have all made significant contributions to the development and evolution of feminist literary criticism. According to Lisa Tuttle [11], the overarching objective of feminist criticism is to establish and identify a female literary tradition, to evaluate women writers and their writings employing a female viewpoint, to decode the implicit symbolism in women's writing so ensuring it is not overlooked or dismissed from a male bias, and to combat sexism in literature while enhancing awareness of the sexual politics embedded within linguistic and stylistic elements.

4. Features of feminist literary criticism

Feminist literary criticism is a literary criticism informed by feminist theory. Since its inception, feminist literary criticism has been marked by a proliferation of schools of thought and intricate theoretical frameworks. Feminist literary criticism can be conceptualized as follows:

1) The concept of pluralism, in conjunction with the notion of continuous enrichment, forms the theoretical foundation of this approach.

In the era of the vigorous rise of the second feminist movement, which encompasses liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, and Marxist feminism, the most active period until the advent of postmodern feminism, ecological feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, and other schools of thought that continue to develop, the schools of thought are diversified and coexist, engaging in continuous debate and contention, which serves as the internal impetus for the continuous development of feminist literary criticism. The distinguishing characteristic of feminist literary criticism is its diversity and its tendency to engage in inter-school debate. This dynamic has emerged as a fundamental driving force within the field. The evolution of feminist literary criticism has been multifaceted, beginning with the early theoretical exploration that centered exclusively on women's struggles. This was followed by a shift towards gender research, which aimed to transform the prevailing unfair gender culture. The present scope of feminist literary criticism is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, encompassing psychoanalysis, political theory, philosophy, ecological and environmental research, and racial research, among other fields. This critical and interdisciplinary research has permeated all areas of the social and human sciences, as well as

natural sciences, becoming a prominent research paradigm in contemporary Western society and culture. This interdisciplinary academic framework has permeated various fields, including the social sciences, human sciences, and natural sciences, thus becoming a predominant intellectual framework within contemporary Western society and culture.

2) The foundation of this approach is firmly anchored in both empirical observation and theoretical innovation.

The genesis of feminist literary criticism is deeply intertwined with the women's movement, with its theoretical propositions and empirical investigations being inextricably linked to the objectives and challenges of that movement and the prevailing sociocultural realities. Whether it is in the full swing of the movement or in the solid construction of the discipline, feminists are firstly concerned about the inequality of power between men and women and its solution. Feminist literary criticism's concern for reality is an important reason for its vitality.

The vitality and adaptability of feminist literary criticism are contingent on two fundamental elements: introspection and ongoing innovation. For instance, drawing from the tenets of multiculturalism, contemporary feminist literary criticism has incorporated a plethora of elements, including but not limited to race, age, and culture. These elements have been regarded as an interactive whole closely related to gender. Consequently, these elements have been utilized to analyze the intricate relationship between genders and their relationship with other categories. These trends in theoretical change are significant factors in the longevity of feminist literary criticism.

5. The concept of female literature

5.1. Feminist literary criticism theory

The theoretical framework of feminist criticism is widely considered to have been established by Simone de Beauvoir's book titled *The Second Sex* [12]. On the one hand, she argued that Western society was a male-dominated, familial society in which women were the second sex and in a subordinate position. On the other hand, she systematically liquidated the "myths of women" written by male authors and criticized their misinterpretation of women. Drawing from a wide array of philosophical, psychological, historical, literary, and anecdotal sources, she demonstrates that the impediments to women's autonomy are not inherent biological factors but rather are shaped by political and legal constraints. The study of feminist literature is predicated on the notion that it is "the struggle for women's freedom." The fundamental concern of this literary genre is women's consciousness and the state of women's existence and destiny. That is, it is concerned with resisting the suppression and persecution of women by patriarchal culture, opposing women's subordination, and calling for women's emancipation. Elaine Showalter asserts that in its formative stages, feminist criticism was primarily concerned with the identification and exposure of misogyny in literary discourse. This misogyny was manifested in the stereotypical presentation of women as angels or monsters within textual narratives, as well as in the various forms of literary violence or mistreatment directed towards women in both classic and popular male literary works. Additionally, feminist criticism emphasised the necessity of acknowledging women's contributions to the literary field and addressing their exclusion from traditional portrayals [13]. In this regard, three seminal works merit particular attention: Katherine M. Rogar's *The Troublesome Helpmate* [14], Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* [15], and Kate Millette's *Sexual Politics* [6]. These books laid the foundation for the development of Anglo-American Feminist Criticism. Feminist literary criticism is an academic field that focuses on the analysis of women's consciousness as depicted in literary

works. This critical approach examines women's rights to life and development, their diverse inner life experiences, and the challenges they encounter in reality.

5.2. A discourse on three propositions of feminist literary criticism

5.2.1. Feminine image metaphors: angels and sirens

Influenced by Marxist theories on the analysis of socio-economic structures and ideologies, it is widely believed that the women written by male writers, be they angels or sirens, are in fact misrepresentations and oppression of women in different ways. These representations thus reveal the discrimination and devaluation of women in patriarchal societies, the abuse of men's literature on women, and the textual harassment and restriction hidden behind such images. These depictions of women are characterized by a male-centered consciousness and bias, and the texts authored by these male writers can be regarded as a manifestation of the ongoing oppression of women. Conversely, female writers have been influenced by patriarchal consciousness, leading them to shape the characteristics of their female protagonists in accordance with the expectations of their male readership. This has resulted in a failure to develop authentic female representations within their own imaginative processes. In response to the pervasive male-centeredness that characterizes women's texts, feminist literary criticism posits that a subset of women's texts should be regarded as feminist texts. This perspective asserts that portrayals of madwomen and witches should be interpreted as a manifestation of women's collective consciousness in the face of patriarchal oppression.

5.2.2. Returning the focus to women: body writing

Since the 1970s, feminist literary criticism, following the deconstruction of the image of women in male texts, has proceeded to dismantle the image of women in texts by women writers. Concurrently, feminist critics initiated the composition of texts in their own language. These individuals further subverted patriarchal ideology, seeking to express themselves in a manner that defied traditional norms. They sought to establish a distinctive discourse system and mode of expression for women. In this regard, they advanced the concept of "body writing." In order to eliminate the oppression of patriarchal society, it is necessary to start from the deconstruction and criticism of writing and language. The significance of women's writing is also found in the liberation of the bound and repressed female body, which can be considered a form of writing from and for women. Women should not be intimidated by the scrutiny of the male gaze or societal prejudices. Instead, they should confidently represent the body and articulate the beauty of their own experiences. The concept of "body writing" underscores the imperative for women to articulate their personal experiences and modes of discourse. It accentuates the distinctive characteristics of women's writing that have been perpetuated and absorbed over time, thereby embodying the authentic essence of femininity and their lived experiences.

5.2.3. An exploration of female subjectivity

The issue of the female subject has been a fundamental concern in the history of feminist literary criticism. A comprehensive resolution to this issue hinges upon the full manifestation of female subjectivity and the articulation of autonomous freedom as a subject. Female subjectivity necessitates that female writers assert their inherent power and capacity as conscious beings. This enables feminist criticism to transcend the conventional male discourse system, characterized by

hierarchical structures and logical frameworks. Consequently, feminist criticism elevates the focus on the tradition of women's selves, encompassing their unique language, writing style, narrative techniques, and reading experiences.

The objective of this study is to explore specific means of "female" literary expression in order to reflect specific female subjectivity in literature. A primary tenet of this approach underscores the significance of empiricism and non-literary parameters in the study of women's literature. That is to say, it accentuates the "female experience" as divergent from the male experience. In the domain of literary theory, a notable construct pertaining to "female experience" is that of "secondary authorship". This concept implicitly acknowledges the prevailing gender and linguistic norms, as well as stereotypes, that characterize a specific cultural epoch. Consequently, it serves to articulate and internalize patriarchal aesthetics and social values. This approach is most fully implemented in the books of Elaine Showalter: *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*, and others [16,17].

6. Conclusion

The field of feminist literary criticism has evolved in tandem with the various waves of feminism, thereby deepening our appreciation of literature. Contemporary theoretical advancements, particularly intersectional and Kool-Aid theories, have introduced critical new dimensions to our analytical repertoire. It is evident that feminist criticism must originate from and exceed the confines of gender, thereby establishing a cross-gender social community that encompasses both male and female writers and critics. The concept of gender cannot be disentangled from the social context; it is an inherent aspect of nature and social issues, exhibiting a multifaceted and constructive nature. Consequently, feminist critical methodology should exhibit greater compatibility and diversification with other modes of criticism.

In summary, feminist literary criticism is a political movement that aims to advocate for social, economic, and political rights, as well as the cultural status of women. This approach serves to safeguard the marginalization of women within the literary canon, thereby demonstrating a profound concern for the recognition and valorization of women's contributions to the literary tradition. The field of feminist literary criticism in the West is still in a state of evolution. By engaging in critical examination of language, feminists contribute to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and social justice. While feminist literary criticism has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in accentuating disparities and persistently unveiling social injustices, it is imperative that it also serves as a pivotal catalyst for fostering a cohesive transgender social community.

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