



# "FEMINIST CRITICISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON 20TH CENTURY SOCIETY"

**Dhanya.R Assistant professor**

Department of English

Sree Narayana Guru College, Coimbatore, India

**Abstract:** As the feminist movement grew, feminist literature also gained momentum. Authors like Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill spoke out against the oppression of women in various aspects of life. As the movement spread worldwide, feminists began to focus on how women were portrayed in literature, seeing it as a powerful tool for social change. Feminists argued that the idea of womanhood wasn't something natural or biological, but rather something shaped by society. Women, they believed, were socialized into specific roles. Early feminist literature often responded to and challenged the negative stereotypes of women that were created by male writers and readers. These stereotypes had a strong impact on how men viewed women. Feminist literature moved from being passively engaged to more actively involved, realizing that women's voices had been suppressed in male-dominated literary traditions. This led to the creation of a new literary tradition led by women writers. This tradition was divided into three phases: the feminine phase, the feminist phase, and the female phase, each marking a different stage. Feminist critics also looked into the struggles women faced in writing and explored how women's creativity was understood through post-structuralist ideas. By using post-structuralist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic methods, they studied what makes female creativity unique. They concluded that there are differences between male and female writers. They also analyzed how language is shaped and pointed out the male-centered focus in much of Western literature and criticism. Additionally, they began to look at the language style of women writers. Some of the feminist critics mentioned in this essay include Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter, and Simone de Beauvoir.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Gynocriticism, Sexuality, Feminist Criticism, Women's Creativity, Phallogocentric, Sexual Politics, Images of Women, Social Construct.

Feminist criticism became popular in the 1960s, focusing on raising awareness about women's lives in politics, society, culture, religion, and economics. Women have often faced discrimination in all areas, including writing and literary criticism. Historically, female writers have been ignored or not given the respect they deserve, while male theorists have controlled Western literary theory. Feminist critique aims to challenge male-dominated ideas in literature and create a space for female writers.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, is considered a cornerstone of feminist thought and is often referred to as the "feminist Bible" due to its lasting impact. The book was translated into English in 1953 and has remained influential into the present day. In this work, de Beauvoir critiques the patriarchal structures that have long dominated society and have led to the marginalization of women in various areas, including politics, religion, and social life. She explores the historical oppression of women from multiple angles, calling for equal rights and opportunities for both men and women, irrespective of gender. De Beauvoir also challenges the ideologies that justify the inferior status of women, arguing that gender roles are not biologically determined but are socially constructed. To truly fulfill their potential, women must reject these societal impositions and break free from the cultural definitions of femininity created by a male-dominated world.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1986) is another foundational work in feminist literary criticism. Showalter begins by arguing that male critics of English and other languages have largely ignored female authors. She also suggests that there are essential differences between the writing of men and women. According to Showalter, only women are capable of fully understanding and appreciating women's literature and its creativity. Additionally, she identifies three distinct phases in the evolution of women's writing.

1. **Feminine Phase (1842–1880):** The first stage in women's writing, from 1842 to 1880, is called the feminine phase. During this time, women writers tried to write like men to show they were just as smart and talented. They also followed the stereotypes of women common in a male-dominated world. Since they were still learning how to write, many didn't realize the consequences of copying male writers. Some used male pen names or kept their writing secret. Elaine Showalter says that the feminist ideas in this writing are often hidden and not obvious (Showalter, 217). Writers like Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot were part of this phase.
2. **Feminist Phase (1880–1920):** The feminist phase, from 1880 to 1920, happened when women gained the right to vote. During this time, women writers focused on the challenges of being women in a society controlled by men. Many of these writers

pushed back against male ideas of what literature should be. Radical feminists supported women's suffrage and created feminist utopias. Writers like Olive Schreiner and Elizabeth Robbins explored these themes in their work (Selden, 141).

3. **Female Phase (1920–Present):** Starting in 1920, the female phase marked a time when women writers focused on their own personal experiences and feelings as women. Instead of copying male styles, they created their own ways of writing that better expressed their unique perspectives. Authors like Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, and Rebecca West were part of this stage.

Feminist criticism can be divided into two main branches: Feminist critique and Gynocriticism. The first, feminist critique, focuses on how women engage with literature, specifically examining how they read works authored by men. This approach delves into the ideologies behind literary traditions and the representation of women, often revealing stereotypical portrayals of females in literary works. It also highlights the many female authors who have been overlooked, silenced, or dismissed by male critics throughout history. Since women are often depicted in literature from a male perspective, feminist critics argue that these representations are not authentic. Instead, they reflect what men believe women should be, based on their own perceptions, which is then passed on to the audience. Feminist critique works to expose these distorted portrayals of women in literature, film, culture, and other forms of media.

Gynocriticism is a field of study that focuses on women as creators of literature and art. It examines the challenges that female authors face and emphasizes the importance of developing approaches that are not based on male-dominated literary traditions. This approach draws from theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and structuralism. Gynocriticism advocates for women to separate themselves from the male literary tradition, rediscover forgotten female writers, and create a distinct literary culture for women. It emphasizes that women should express their own thoughts, emotions, and experiences through their work and not rely on male-centered literary theories. Instead, women should develop their own theoretical frameworks rooted in their unique experiences and creativity.

Virginia Woolf, one of the most influential female critics of the 20th century, frequently addressed the challenges women have faced throughout history. In her essay "Shakespeare's Sister," she examines how women have had to overcome significant social, cultural, and financial barriers to pursue their artistic dreams. Woolf argues that the dominance of men and the patriarchy continually hindered women's ambitions as writers. At the beginning of her essay, she points out the lack of historical records about women's lives, suggesting that women often had no control over their own destinies. She imagines the scenario of Shakespeare having a sister who shared his brilliance, creativity, and imagination, yet her potential would have been stifled. She would likely have been denied an education and any opportunity to develop her talents. The expectations of her parents would have pressured her into an arranged marriage at a young age, possibly under duress. If she had defied these pressures and moved to London to pursue her writing, society would have ridiculed her aspirations. Ultimately, Woolf suggests, her struggles and lack of opportunity could have led her to despair and possibly even suicide, as she was denied the chance to fulfill her artistic potential.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf addresses the challenges faced by women aspiring to be creative writers. The title itself is significant, emphasizing the central idea that for a woman to succeed as a writer, she needs a private space—a room of her own. For a woman to have such a space, she must also be financially independent. Woolf argues that historically, women's lack of financial freedom has hindered their ability to pursue literary ambitions. They were often denied access to education and the resources necessary for independence, even if they had the talent and intellectual potential. Furthermore, if a woman managed to succeed as a writer despite these systemic barriers, society would not recognize or support her accomplishments. Instead, she would face societal scrutiny. Woolf elaborates on how women were systematically excluded from educational opportunities, while men were given every chance to develop their creative abilities. Ultimately, the central argument of *A Room of One's Own* is that financial independence and personal space are essential for women to fully realize their creative potential. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf makes the following argument:

*All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon 1 minus point a woman must have money and room and her own room if she is to write fiction; and that it as you will see lives the great problem of true nature of women and the true nature of fiction on solve this. . . I have if I lay bare the ideas the prejudices that lie behind this statement you will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction (Woolf, 4)*

In another article, *Profession for Women*, she explored in detail the evolution of women's careers. She argued that once women achieve economic, social, and political equality, they will fully unleash their creativity, and nothing will hinder them from expressing their ideas and emotions.

Juliet Mitchell is a significant figure in the feminist movement, particularly in the development of political feminism. While feminist critics often rejected Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as inherently anti-feminist, Mitchell has shown how Freud's ideas, when reinterpreted through the lens of Jacques Lacan, can offer valuable insights for feminist critique. Her renowned work, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing, and Women* (1975), demonstrates how psychoanalysis can be a useful tool for feminist analysis. Mitchell argues that sexuality and the unconscious are social constructs, not biological facts. She has also reinterpreted Lacan's theories to illustrate how notions of masculinity and femininity are shaped by cultural influences. Raman Selden highlights Mitchell's contribution to feminist criticism in the following way:

Juliet Mitchell, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975) defends Freud arguing that 'psychoanalysis' is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. Freud, she believes, is describing the mental representation of a social reality, not reality itself. (Selden, 146)

As highlighted in the previous discussion, feminist criticism has progressed considerably since it first emerged, incorporating insights from other fields like psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, while also developing its own unique theories. Initially, it was reactive, primarily focused on uncovering the stereotypical depictions of women in works by male authors. Over time, however, it shifted to place greater emphasis on the voices and experiences of women themselves. With the emergence of newer feminist thinkers, the field continues to evolve and grow.

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