

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LITERATURE AND FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

The expression Literary Feminism has two key words: literature and feminism. The term is used interchangeably with feminist literary criticism. As an academic subject, different from countless activists fighting discrimination and bias in the real world, feminism is an interdisciplinary field which cuts across subject boundaries. Students of history, psychology, sociology, law, among others, study feminism. However, feminism has an extremely important relationship to literary studies. Since its beginning the literary dimension of feminism has played a very important role in shaping the nature of the subject, hence the currency of the expression literary feminism. Literary studies has not been a stable field. How literature is defined and studied and what constitutes the subject matter of literature are questions which have been answered differently in different times. The advent of theory since the sixties has changed the way readers approach works of literature. Literature was earlier viewed as a universal and timeless artifact. For example it was generally held that the message in the works of literature, particularly in the works of great writers like **Shakespeare** and **Milton**, was addressed to all people in all times to come.

KEYWORDS-FEMINISM, SECOND SEX, SUBORDINATES, SIMON D BOVIOR, SHAKESPEARE, MILTON, DHIRKHIEM.

INRODUCTION

LITERARY FEMINISM

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However, feminism has an extremely important relationship to literary studies. Since its beginning the literary dimension of feminism has played a very important role in shaping the nature of the subject, hence the currency of the expression literary feminism. Literary studies has not been a stable field. How literature is defined and studied and what constitutes the subject matter of literature are questions which have been answered differently in different times. The advent of theory since the sixties has changed the way readers approach works of literature. Literature was earlier viewed as a universal and timeless artifact. For example it was generally held that the message in the works of literature, particularly in the works of great writers like **Shakespeare** and **Milton**, was addressed to all people in all times to come.

Theory posed some difficult questions. It focused attention on the implications of race, class and gender in literary studies. The first difficult questions were asked by feminist critics. They charged literature for its sexist bias. They questioned the relevance of the canon. They raised the question of the exclusion of women writers in the established canon of literature.

Putting gender issues at the very centre of their reading and writing, they offered to read literature in a different manner. In other words a theoretically alert literary feminism was born. Though it is an ongoing project, some important works published in the sixties and the seventies have had a seminal influence on literary feminism. Two dominant aspects of literary feminism are generally emphasized by these works:

(a) Women as Readers (b) Women as Writers

Women as Readers A growing number of women readers took up the task of reading texts written by male writers. They focused attention on many problematic aspects of texts to which male critics were supposedly blind. Thus to quote a famous example, cited by Jonathan Culler, the sale of his wife Susan and his baby daughter by **Michael Henchard** in **Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge** is likely to affect a woman reader differently. Susan being represented as a hag, a property, a thing, a commodity to be disposed of so that Michael Henchard can resume his normal life appears very pathological indeed.

However, this did not appear so problematic to all male critics. Elaine Showalter quotes the example of Irving Howe, a male critic, praising this scene in the novel: To shake loose from one's wife, to discard that drooping rag of a woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity, to escape not by a slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a stranger, as horses are sold at a fair, and thus to wrest, through sheer amoral willfulness, a second chance out of life it is with this stroke, so insidiously attractive to male fantasy, that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* begins. (quoted in Morris 38)

This image of a suffering wife and a woman can fill a woman's heart with horror. A number of critics have quoted this passage in their works to show the insensitivity of a particular kind of criticism. This kind of criticism was considered phallic criticism by Mary Ellman. Gradually a number of works appeared which looked at these negative images of women in works of male writers. In fact, a whole industry of 'images of women study' flourished in the academy. Two pioneering studies which influenced 'images of women study' include Mary Ellman's *Thinking about Women* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*.

Myth and Archetypal criticism had already talked about some stock images which have appeared in literature. Images like 'the temptress' 'the Mother', 'the wise old man' were already discussed in archetypal criticism. Many works also discussed 'the hero' archetype in works of literature. There is some link between archetypal criticism and the feminine stereotypes highlighted by **Mary Ellman**.

She discovered that men have traditionally identified women with some stereotypes. The feminine stereotypes, she highlighted, included, among others, formlessness, passivity, instability, materiality, spirituality, piety and irrationality. Thus the stereotype of irrationality means that unlike men who are thought to be rational creatures women are dubbed as irrational. How often in our day to day life do we hear that women are guided by their heart and men by their mind? Ellman (1968) also spoke against what she called '**sexual analogy**' whereby the emotional and intellectual nature of women is considered equal to their sexual nature. In a very witty manner she discussed the treatment given to women's writing in phallic criticism. "There must always be two literatures like two public toilets, one for men and one for women(32-33)."

In another interesting formulation she said that books by women are treated like women by male critics. **Ellman's** work is important for literary feminism because she has given examples mostly from literature **Kate Millet's Sexual Politics** was even more influential. She dared to attack canonical male writers like **D.H.Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer** and **Jean Genet** for perpetuating some misogynistic images of women. She revealed that Lawrence celebrates a cult of virility in his fiction, Miller displays women hatred in his work and Mailer shows his anxiety and fear of losing power to women.

The common feature in their work was the division of strictly masculine and feminine personality. Like Ellman, Millet also highlights the fact that men are identified with leadership and ambition whereas women with domesticity, child-bearing and dependence on men. Concepts like aggression, intelligence, force and efficiency are associated with men and passivity, ignorance, docility and ineffectuality with women.

This kind of binary division where men are associated with some positive qualities and women with negative appears in the work of many other feminist critics. In fact, it is a dominant idea in feminist discourse. In her highly celebrated book **The Second Sex (1949)**, which is now considered a feminist classic,

French thinker **Simone de Beauvoir**, drawing upon Hegel's distinction between the Self and the Other, discussed how women have always been defined as the other of men. In her exposition of this distinction, self is male whereas its other is female. The other is associated with all negative traits which the self discards. Thus if the 'self' considers itself rational, the 'other' is given the identity of irrational.

All other binary divisions such as strong and weak, active and passive, aggression and docility can be explained on this basis. **Shoshana Felman's** words can be quoted here: "**Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by man as his opposite, that is to say as his other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, Otherness itself**(quoted in Ruthvan 1984:43)." This arbitrary division of male and female characteristics creates problems for reading the texts written by men. Should women readers identify with a male point of view aggressively present in texts like those of D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer? Should they not try to read differently? Why should they be forced to take pleasure in the sale of a wife and a baby daughter which fills them with dread? Why should they be forced to read like a man? Why should they not read like women? These questions have been raised by most feminist critics. The title of **Judith Fetterley's** work **The Resisting Reader (1978)** answers some of these questions. Influenced by Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Judith Fetterley's book is also a feminist intervention in reader-response criticism. In the Preface of the book she outlined her intention to take up this kind of work. Obliquely referring to Marx's emphasis on social change, she exhorted the feminist readers to change the existing practices of reading. She considered feminist criticism a political act, the aim of which is 'not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read'. And Fetterley attempts to change the consciousness of the reader by refusing to accept what is there in the work.

The existing practice of accepting everything on trust must go. She exhorts the feminist critic to 'become a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader and by this refusal to assent to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted' in women readers. The intent of Fetterley was nothing short of revolutionary as she announced her work to be "**a self-defense survival manual for the woman reader lost in 'the masculine wilderness of the American novel'**" "**Fetterley** discovered that American writers have presented American experience from a purely male point of view.

The idea of a life in an all-male world free from the chains of domesticity, the concept of male-bonding, the restricting influence of women on men are all taken up in American stories and novels. She studied many celebrated stories such as "**Rip Van Winkle**", "I Want to Know Why", "The Birthmark", and "A Rose for Emily" and novels like *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Bostonians* to see the celebration of a male point of view. In all Fetterley's was an important work to reveal male bias in American literature.

Women as Writers

Elaine Showalter identified two important aspects of feminist criticism: feminist critique and gynocritics. A concern with works written by male writers and a critique of the representation of women in their works, in other words, women as readers, defines the first aspect. **Mary Ellman's** critique of phallic criticism, **Kate Millet's** attack on canonical male writers, and Judith Fetterley's advocacy for the resisting reader are obviously part of feminist critique. **Gynocritics**, on the contrary, is a more positive project and is concerned with 'woman as the producer of textual meaning'. In her famous essay "**Feminist Criticism in Wilderness**" Showalter explained that gynocritics is concerned with "Women as writers...the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition (quoted in **Ruthvan** 1984:94)." A concern with gynocritics can be seen not only in Showalter's work but also in the work of a number of women critics. In her work **Literary Women (1977)**, Ellen Moers concentrates on women writers' interaction with each other and the literary relationships formed by them. By talking about a number of canonic women writers' communication with each other Moers emphasizes the presence of a literary tradition. She discusses how there was a literary interaction between George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe and between **Emily Dickinson** and **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**. Moers also highlights the distinctive and unique in the work of each writer. The discovery of kinship between women writers, it is often not realized, had very deep implications.

As Pam Morris says finding their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared, named and shaped into literary form gave (and continues to give) many women, some for the first time, a sense that their own

existence was meaningful, that their view of things was valid and intelligent, and their suffering was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in women's collective strength to resist and remake their own lives.

Writing by women can tell the story of the aspects of women's lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized in the majority of traditional texts.(60) Elaine Showalter also discussed a female literary tradition in English literature in her famous book **A Literature of Their Own**. She considers women's literature in terms of a 'female subculture', which has its own themes, patterns and motifs. She also viewed literary periods from the perspective of women's writing and divided them into three different phases namely feminine, feminist and female:

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.

Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. However, critics of Showalter point to the racial bias in her scheme. As **Susie Tharu** and **K. Lalita** write," although the period covered by Showalter's book coincides with the age of high imperialism, neither Britain's colonial '**possessions**' nor the complicity of English women, writers not excluded, in the ideologies of class and of empire are seriously dealt with (1991:18)." In a work of a different nature, **Sandra Gilbert** and **Susan Gubar** also try to highlight a female literary tradition and female literary creativity as women writers' 'response to male literary assertion and coercion.'

In the face of male literary traditions women writers experienced a sense of anxiety and confinement. Focusing on the work of women writers like Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontes, **George Eliot** and **Emily Dickinson**, **Gilbert** and **Gubar** discover a hidden note of rage, revolt and concealment in Women's writing. They pay special attention to **Bertha Mason** in **Charlotte Bronte Jane Eyre** and consider her a typical example of this rage and concealment. As they write: As we explore nineteenth-century literature, we will find that this mad woman emerges over and over again from the mirrors women writers hold up both to their own natures and to their own visions of nature.

Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors' submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them.(1979:77-78)

One very important line of inquiry in gynocritics is the discovery of lost women writers. The assumption implicit in the concept of lost writers is that many women must have written in the past without getting any recognition for their effort. It also implies that many women would not have been able to get their writings published as the time may not have been suitable for them to publish. The discovery of lost writers was taken up with a sense of urgency by a number of feminist critics.

Showalter's work was responsible for the rediscovery of **Mary E. Braddon**, **Rhoda Broughton**, **Sarah Grand** and **George Egerton**. Critic **Nina Baym** conducted her search for a tradition of women's writing and for lost women American novelists in her study of women novelists in America from 1820 to 1870. The idea of a female tradition of writing also informs the monumental study titled *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. To the Present* (in two volumes) edited by **Susie Tharu** and **K. Lalita**. Their work is even more important as they have highlighted the work of a number of women writers who wrote in different Indian languages right from the ancient period to the present. However, unlike Nina Baym, Showalter or Ellen Moers, Tharu and Lalita focus on writing cutting across genres and not necessarily literature which though is not excluded in their magnum opus.

But such has been the influence of Tharu and Lalita that no anthology of Indian women's writing can be attempted without acknowledging a debt to their effort. A recent anthology of women's writing titled *UnBound:2000 Years of Indian Women's Writing*, edited by **Annie Zaidi**, makes its selection on the basis of 'literary craft, genre bending abilities'. The book, as Zaidi says, focuses on "writers who have a significant body of literary work and not just one memoir, for instance. This rule would apply to at least 20th century writers. There are

exceptions from times when reading and writing were discouraged, if not forbidden, for women.”(The Hindu, 4 June 2015) An important issue in gynocritics is the nature of female creativity.

This question has been hotly debated both in a theoretical as well as an empirical manner. Do women write differently from men? Do they use language differently? Are there some words which women tend to use more often? Is there really a style of writing which is essentially feminine or masculine? Is the literary imagination androgynous, partaking of both male and female characteristics? The answer to these questions has not been conclusive. Essentially there are two different approaches adopted to answer these questions. The Anglo-American tradition uses the empirical method of analyzing the words used by men and women and tries to make some conclusions.

For many of these critics women’s writing is marked by a kind of fluency. Others believe that women’s writing should not be punctuated. Still others believe that women tend to relate to their subject and hence objectivity in writing is a male ideal. However, these issues are far from settled. A lot of research has gone into discovering what is called WL (the initials stand for both a woman’s language as well as women’s language).

CONCLUSION

The issue of WL has been approached from the perspective of psychological and somatic theories. Psychological theories see the source of WL in the unconscious while somatic theories locate WL in the female body. Thus using Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory French critic Julia Kristeva looks at the source of WL in a child’s babble when language has not intervened. Interestingly, according to her account, WL can be detected even in the works of some avant guard male writers like Joyce and Mallarme. Somatic theories, mainly represented by the ideas of French critics **Helene Cixous** and **Luce Irigaray**, see “morphological differences between the sexual organs as the source of such ‘masculine’ characteristics as the preoccupation with correct meanings and a unified subject, and ‘feminine’ characteristics like process, plurality and diversity.(Ruthvan100)”

In recent years the scope of literary feminism has grown further. The development and refinement of theories outside the western world, a growing awareness about women issues, the rapidly rising number of academics engaged in the study of feminism and the establishment of feminist presses have all influenced the course of literary feminism

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