

## Feminism and its Major Postulates: A Critical Overview

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**Abstract:** Feminism as a theory and critical approach represents one of the most important social, economic, and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. Contemporary feminism began in the late eighteenth century as a social movement to achieve political equality for women. Feminist not only fight against discrimination but also for emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression by the state, society and men. They declare to the world that women are also human beings and women's rights' are human rights. As Helene Cixous puts it: "Women must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history"—by her own movement (Cixous 875-93). The term feminism was first used by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French dramatist, Alexander Dumas, to refer to the then—emerging movement for women's rights which was mostly limited to politics. It gradually spread across the world, securing complete rights for woman—political, social, economic and educational.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Masculine, Men, Feminist, Patriarchal, Women, Rights.

One of the most succinct definitions of feminism has been given by Jane Freedman. According to her: "Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding amelioration in their social position" (Freedman 3). According to the main slogan of 4th World Women's Conference held at Beijing in 1995, Feminism implies looking at the world through women's eyes. It seeks to bring about change in patriarchal ideology and mentality, according to which woman are considered inferior and subordinate to men. Patriarchal is a social system where men controls member of the family, property and other economic resources and make major decisions. Also linked to this social system is the belief that man is superior to woman, that women are and should be controlled by men and are a part of men's property. The feminists reject male-female polarity and stereotypes. They have broken the silence about unequal man-woman relationships and have exposed the inequalities and violence that exist within families. It's about re-examining, rethinking and restructuring of all aspects of patriarchal society which marginalize women.

Modern Feminism, as it has emerged over the last hundred years or so, is a multi-vocal, multi-focal and multi-dimensional practice. In addition to being action oriented, Feminism is a doctrine advocating social and political rights for Women equal to those of men. It is also the body of knowledge, thought and theory that feminist thinkers, writers have created to

challenge patriarchal knowledge and ideology. "According to Lynne Segal, 'Why Feminism?' "Because its most radical goal, both personal and collective, has yet to be realized world which is a better place not just for some women, but for all women. And, as she goes on to add, that world would be better not just for women but for men as well." (Segal quoted in Freedman 7)

It is an individual practice as well as organized movement for the attainment of woman's rights. Feminist studies re-examine society and social theory and uncover the fact that woman and woman's perspective are missing from the social sciences, religion, history, art, languages and literature. The feminists examine the experiences of women from all races, classes and cultures. The main strands of feminism are liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, Eco-feminism, Black feminism etc.

In liberal feminism, there is a focus on the public sphere, on legal, political and institutional struggles for the rights of individuals. Public citizenship and the attainment of equality with men in the public arena are central to liberal feminism. It suggests that the cause of women's oppression is lack of opportunities and education.

Radical feminism ascribes a positive value to womanhood. The explanation for women's oppression is seen as lying in sexual oppression. It sees men as beneficiaries of patriarchy and advocates a revolutionary model of social change. Radical

feminists find a particular concern with control over women's bodies and motherhood.

Marxist feminism following the work of Karl Marx, states that class oppression predates sexual oppression. Sexual oppression is seen as a dimension of class power. It advocates a revolutionary approach in which the overthrow of capitalism is viewed as the necessary pre-condition to dismantle male privilege.

Socialist feminism asserts along with radical feminism that woman's subordination predated the development of class based societies. It combines the study of patriarchy and capitalism as a part of social system. It also shows a concern with the social construction of sex i.e. gender in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis.

All issues are women's issues and feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. It is a movement which aims to transform social structures as well as individuals. Feminism focuses on recognizing women's contribution, women's knowledge and helping women fight their own fears and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority and enhancing their self-respect and self-dignity. As a political movement, it struggles to make women economically independent and self-reliant and to give them the control over their own bodies.

Women's struggles are and should be linked to peace movement, ecology movement, working class movement, human rights movement and movement for democratization and decentralization of society. It is not particularly the ideology of feminism that empowers women but rather their capacities to face bravely the individual and social facts of their real conditions of existence.

Women's movement may be traced back to the seventeenth century, when there was a sudden female awareness about the male bias in social and political spheres of life. The need for an equality of status in all spheres of life began in earnest all over the world. Mary Wollstonecraft, an English woman, published her essay '*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' in 1792 which sought to grant women the right to claim their natural and fundamental rights. Male contributors to the tradition of feminist writing include John Stuart Mill with his book *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Friedrich Engels with *The Origin*

*of the Family* (1884).

The idea of Mary Wollstonecraft caught over and became a dominating thought of the twentieth century. At the turn into the twentieth century, the Women's Rights Group acquired the centre stage of women's movement in America. In 1920, the American women got the long awaited right to vote. A number of books such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second sex* (1949), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1911) appeared, vividly portraying the unequal treatment given to the women in the society and discussed the portrayal of women in the works of male writers and questioned them. Beauvoir's book lent great force to the women's liberation movement by drawing heavily on disciplines like biology, psychology and history, girl's education, love, sex, marriage, prostitution and domestic drudgery.

As a movement, Feminism assumed the form of collective and individual endeavor on the part of women at different times and in different countries, to strive for equality of rights and opportunities in all walks of life. Feminism undoubtedly turned out as one of the most influential and revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. The Feminist movement in France has its own, unique history. The origin of feminism in France took place in 1970s. Feminist historians have shown how the history of Feminism is often forgotten, distorted and intermittent. Repeatedly, each time women have taken up the struggle for their rights, they have imagined that they are the first women to do so. In her book *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France* (1944-1968), Claire Duchon, shows how forgotten feminists, during this period when it is often claimed that there was no feminist movement in France, prepared the ground for feminists in the 1970s. The history of Feminism is marked as much by continuity as it is by change. The opposition between reform and revolution which characterized feminism in 1789 persists today. Echoes of contemporary themes and preoccupations of the women's movement can be found through its history. To avoid confusion and because feminism did not appear for the first time in 1970, the feminism of that time is frequently referred to by commentators as 'new' or 'second' wave feminism.

This 'women's rights' feminism made great progress in the 1980s, but still faced problems: equality may have been achieved in law, but it

remained mainly theoretical, and the implementation and monitoring of legislation was not always possible. Women still formed a tiny part of the political, intellectual, and business elites in France, while providing the majority of the low-paid, unskilled workers and of the unemployed. Abolished during the 1986-8 period of political 'cohabitation', the Ministry for Women's Rights was not replaced at such a high level after the return to power of a Socialist government in 1988. Under Prime Minister Michel Rocard there was a junior minister responsible for women's rights (Michele Andre); being without the status, the prestige, the budget of a full minister, she remained fairly low key. The appointment in 1991 of Edith Cresson as France's first woman prime minister was accompanied, however, by an increase in the number of women in high-level political positions.

In the 1970s, French feminists approached feminism with the concept of 'écriture féminine', which translates as 'female' of 'female writing'. Helene Cixous argues that writing and philosophy are phallogocentric and along with other French feminists such as Luce Irigaray, emphasizes "writing from the body" as a subversive exercise. The work of feminist psychoanalyst and philosopher, Julia Kristeva, has greatly influenced feminist theory in general and feminist literary criticism in particular. From the 1980s onwards, the work of artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger has influenced literary criticism, art history, and film theory. However, as the scholar Elizabeth Wright pointed out, "none of these French feminists align themselves with the feminist movement as it appeared in the Anglophone world." (Wright, *The Kristeva Reader*, 328)

It was in the 1960's that a new approach to the portrayal of women's character in works of literature by male and female writers came about as a direct product of the women's movement of the time. With the emergence of multiple new critical approaches towards literature, feminist criticism became vital, ideological and interpretive strategy for study of literary works. It began when the woman writers, readers and critics started to re-examine the reflection of feminine experience in works of literature. They found that a deep rooted gender bias has become part of the historical, textual and literary tradition. The woman activists began to question the validity of role models assigned to women writers such as Jane

Austen, The Bronte Sisters, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf had already welcomed the significance and tradition of women's writing.

Gradually, from the combative criticism of books by male writers and exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy, feminist literary criticism switched its focus to formulate its own critical strategies and to construct a new realm of women writers. It rejects androcentric ideology and masculinist approaches towards women's literature. It aims at looking things from "a woman's point of view ...an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable though the centuries" (Spacks 4-5). Feminist literary critics try to explain how power imbalances due to gender differentiation in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary texts. The Feminist critical perspective also seeks to discover the female author's quest for empowerment through self-expression by escaping the controlling authority of the male in the realm of social/sexual power. Feminist criticism became much more eclectic with the publication of pioneering works on women's condition and women intellectuals and critics. Indeed, the focal point of feminist criticism is rooted in the significance of womanhood as an experience.

French feminist criticism is more influenced by French theorists like Lacan, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. They use the concepts such as "imaginary", the "semiotic"/"symbolic" 'notion to bring out the feminine and the female. British feminist, by contrast, a criticism is more influenced by socialism, cultural materialism and Marxism. American feminism criticism is partly inclined towards post structuralism, psychoanalysis and American deconstruction but tries to retain some of the traditional critical concepts like theme, motif, characterization, in interpreting literary texts. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) has analyzed and exposed the oppressive representation of sexuality found in the novels of male writers like D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Jean Genette. The *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan demystified the dominant image of the American suburban housewife and mother and called for an end to sex discrimination and enforcement of equal rights. Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1981) focuses on the gender bias in language and control through language, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), Toril Moi's

*Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Mary Ellmann's *Thinking about Women* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979), Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1978), Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering; Psychoanalysis and the sociology of Gender* (1978), Julia Kristeva's *Power of Horror; an Essay on Abjection* (1987), Elaine Showalter's *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* are some of the influential works in the general area of Feminism.

As an ideology, feminist critics have now come to be aligned themselves with Gynocriticism. The term coined by Elaine Showalter, to describe the feminist study of women's writing and is known as 'Ecriture Feminine' in French, meaning feminine writing. As Elaine Showalter says, the emphasis definitely shifted by the late 1970's from 'andro-text' to 'gyno-text'. Gynocentric criticism concentrates on female creativity, stylistics, themes, images, careers and literary traditions. The idea of female aesthetics found a forceful voice in this phase of its struggle with patriarchy through the work of pioneering feminist thinkers and intellectuals.

Elaine Showalter calls for a feminist criticism that is genuinely women-centered, independent and intellectually coherent with its own system, its own theory and its own voice. The concept of 'Ecriture Feminine' provides a way of talking about women's writing which reasserts the value of the feminine. It states that a woman's physicality is the corporal ground of her intelligence. Showalter asserts that self-revelation, which makes effort to find and use an appropriate female language. "As Gerda Lerner argues, woman live duality-as members of the general culture and as partakers of woman's culture. It is important to understand that 'women's culture is not and should not be seen as a subculture.'" (Gerda 52)

"Feminism and Postmodernism have emerged as two of the most important political cultural currents of the last few decades. Both these offered deep and far-reaching criticisms of philosophy, and of the relation of philosophy to the larger culture" (Sarup 156). The postmodern feminist who first developed these ideas were a group of French writers, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous. The French feminism that these writers developed began to

move feminism in postmodern direction. Although the work of these writers is far from identical, all focus on the major theme of postmodern thought: the rejection of modernist dualism. Irigaray argues that the modernist dualism that defines women as 'other' create a trap for women. The only solution, she argues, is to embrace a pluralistic epistemology that defies dualisms. She advocates developing a feminine writing (écriture feminine) that opens up what the postmodernists call phallographic writing: the masculinist, dualistic discourse that characterizes modernism. Kristeva approaches the issue of modernist dualities from the perspective of the psychoanalytic work of Lacan. Lacan's thesis is that in phallographic language woman is just the 'other', she is a lack; she is quite literally not present in discourse. Kristeva uses this theory to argue that women's position outside of discourse provides her with the radical potential to disrupt and transform discourse. Thus, like Irigaray, she advocates a distinctively feminine writing. Cixous' discussion of feminine writing leads her in another direction. She defines what she calls a 'feminine imaginary' that can escape the dualism of the masculine subject. Although French Feminism had a significant impact on feminist thought, it is the work Judith Butler that has been the definitive influence in postmodern feminism. The publication of Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990 brought postmodern Feminism to the forefront of Feminist thought.

Feminist criticism comes in many forms, and feminist critics have a variety of goals. Some have been interested in rediscovering the works of woman writers overlooked by a masculine-dominated culture. Others have revisited books by male authors and reviewed them from a woman's point of view to understand how they both reflect and shape the attitudes that have held woman back. A number of contemporary feminists have turned to topics as various as women in postcolonial societies, woman's autobiographical writings, lesbians and literature, womanliness as masquerade, and the role of film and other popular media in the construction of the feminine gender.

Until a few years ago, however, feminist thought tended to be classified not according to topic but rather, according to country of origin. This practice reflected the fact that, during the 1970s and early 1980s,

French, American, and British feminists wrote from somewhat different perspectives.

French feminists tended to focus their attention on language, analyzing the ways in which meaning is produced. They concluded that language, as we commonly think of it is a decidedly male realm. Drawing on the ideas of the psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan, they reminded us that language is a realm of public discourse. A child enters the linguistic realm just as it comes to grasp its separateness from its mother, just about the time that boys identify with their father, the family representative of culture. The language learned reflects a binary logic that opposes such terms as active/passive, masculine/feminine, sun/moon, father/mother, head/heart, son /daughter, intelligent/sensitive, brother/sister, form/matter, phallus/vagina, and reason/emotion. Because this logic tends to group with masculinity, such qualities as light, thought, and activity, French feminists said that the structure of language is *phallogentric*: it privileges the phallus and, more generally, masculinity by associating them with things and values more appreciated by the (masculine-dominated) culture. Moreover, French feminists suggested, “masculine desire dominates speech and pose woman as an idealized fantasy-fulfillment for the incurable emotional lack caused by separation from the mother” (Shelley 296). But some influential French feminists maintained that language only seems to give women such a narrow range of choices. There is another possibility, namely, that Women can develop a *feminine language*. French feminists coined a term called *écriture féminine*: women's writing, as mentioned earlier.

Kristeva, who associated feminine writing with the female body, was joined in her views by other leading French feminists. Heiène Cixous, for instance, also posited an essential connection between the woman's body, whose sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression, and women's writing. “Write yourself Your body must be heard,” Cixous urged; once they learn to write their bodies, women will not only realize their sexuality but enter history and move toward a future based on a “feminine” economy of giving rather than the “masculine” economy of hoarding.” Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*(875-93) For Luce Irigaray,

women's sexual pleasure (*jouissance*) cannot be expressed by the dominant, ordered, “logical,” masculine language. Irigaray explored the connection between women's sexuality and women's language through the following analogy: as women's *jouissance* is more multiple than men's unitary, phallic pleasure (“woman has sex organs just about everywhere”), so “feminine” language is more diffusive than its “masculine” counterpart. Irigaray writes “That is undoubtedly the reason . . . her language . . . goes off in all directions and . . . he is unable to discern the coherence”(Irigaray 101-3).

Whereas feminists writing “feminist critique” analyzed works by men, practitioners of Showalter used to refer to as “*gynocriticism*” studied the writing of these women who, against all odds, produced what she calls “a literature of their own.” In *The Female Imagination* (1975), Spacks examined the female literary tradition to find out how great women writers across the ages have felt, perceived themselves, and imagined reality. Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, concerned themselves with well-known women writers of the nineteenth century, but they too found that general concerns, images, and themes recur, because the authors that they wrote about lived were both overtly and covertly patriarchal. The purposes of gynocriticism was to (re)study well-known women authors, another was to rediscover women's history and culture, particularly women's communities that nurtured female creativity.

### Conclusion

To conclude, diverse as it is, the varieties of Feminist theory/criticism and practice are limitless. At its core, as attempted in this paper, it has four principle concerns: firstly, to elucidate the origin and causes of gender inequality, secondly, to forcefully explain and argue the operation and persistence of this ideology and state of affairs, thirdly, to delineate effective strategies to either bring about full equality between the sexes, or at least ameliorate the effects of the ongoing inequality through multi-dimensional, multidisciplinary invectives and fourthly, to imagine and finally create the world in which such sexual/gender inequality no longer exists. However, both the first and second Wave Feminists agree that femininity—understood as a male-imposed ideology of how women should look and act—is a major limiting factor for Feminist politics. Therefore,

justifiably, from Wollstonecraft to Germaine Greer and Kate Millet feminist writers and critics have advocated to a greater or lesser degree the abandoning of the practice of self-denial most versions of feminist demand. Most feminists, from French to British, American and Asian agreed with Simone de Beauvoir who famously declared that 'Woman is made, not born'.

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