



## **Feminism: An Overview**

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### **Abstract:**

'Feminism' is a wide range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes. The underline premise of feminism is to seek women's equality and justice in every sphere of life and create opportunities for women to have the same access to the resources that are otherwise freely available to men. Since, feminism covers diverse area of inquiry, dealing with the history of women's oppression and possible means to overcome the 'anxiety of authorship' by establishing a literary canon of their own. Feminism is, indeed, a serious attempt to analyse, comprehend and clarify because there are numerous psychosocial and cultural constructs of feminity. This paper, nevertheless, is an attempt to outline some basic assumptions and tenets of feminism and trace the theoretical origin of the movement by exploring few trend setter works in the field of feminist literary theory.

**Keyword:** Feminism, Gynocriticism, second wave feminism,

### **Introduction:**

The term 'feminism' has been derived from the Latin word 'femina,' meaning 'woman' and was first used with regard to the issues of equality and women's Rights Movement. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'feminism' as a state of being feminine or womanly. The Webster's Dictionary defines the term 'feminism' as the principle that women should have political rights equal to those of men. Toril Moi says that "The words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new Woman's Movement which emerged in the late 1960s." Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the terms, masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form on the legal papers."

The definition of the term 'feminism' differs from person to person. Chaman Nahal in his article, "Feminism in English Fiction", defines feminism as "a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or



the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises.”

The fundamental belief behind feminist theory is that from the beginning of human civilization, women have been given a secondary status by masculine dominated social discourse and western philosophical tradition. The history of every civilization shows that women have always been subordinated to a position where they have no means to re-claim their unique identity unless and until they re-visit the history, explore it and finally re-establish it through their own experiences and insights. In order to explore their own unique identity, women have to define themselves against the male informed ideals and beliefs that are passed down from generation to generation. These beliefs have produced dominant system by creating female subjects who are conditioned to accept the values of the system. The physical universe is also dishonored and exploited by men through an analogous exploitation that women are subjected to, reducing both to the docile entities and selfless artefacts. So, in all these three areas- historical traces, philosophical or epistemic tradition and ecological inhalation, men have gained immense control to maneuver the dominance over women as well as nature. To put it more simply, the historical insignificance of women force them to rely and derive existence in relation to men. The epistemic and philosophical system has largely regarded women as non-entity, second mistake, nonexistent creature or a sexual object that oscillates between libido and envy. The third exploitation corresponds the nature’s exploitation, because women have always been compared to nature and with those objects of nature that are serene, cool, and ir-resistive- loving, caring, clay, earth, moon and reproduction and nurturing. The feminist thinkers call these notions into question by showing a protest and resistance to masculine coded codes of conduct. They ground their counter arguments in the theoretical and philosophical framework while taking historical revision of the history to re-establish nascent feminist literary canon. Therefore, feminist literary theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical frame work to analyse causes behind women’s inferior status and to explore the literary tradition of women. While de-centering phallogocentric notions, they passed from various stages in order to establish their unique and autonomous identity. These stages of development gradually helped them to claim what they have been denied from generations.

### **Discussion:**

The history of modern western feminist movement may therefore, be divided into three waves. It was Maggie Humm who divides the emergence and the growth of the modern western feminist movements into three “waves”. All the three feminist waves deal with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave feminist movement started in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this period women campaigned for suffragette movements and raised their voice for equal right to vote and equal access to the parliament. Mary Wollstonecraft’s



book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) can be said to be the precursor for such suffragette movements. Infact, she is regarded as the foremother of British feminist criticism who provided insights to suffragettes to fight the battle for women's rights. In this book she advocated for the equal social and moral rights for women. The second wave feminist movement began in 1960s and was associated with the diverse thinkers who campaigned for equal legal and social rights for women. In this period many landmark works appeared in the literary arena, making the powerful advocacy for women's liberation from masculine coded language and philosophical system. The major works of second wave feminism include but are not limited to - Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* (1949), Elaine Showalter, *The Literature of their own* (1977), Kate Millett *Sexual Politics* (1969), Ellen Moers *Literary Women* (1976), Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (1968). The third wave feminist movement was a continuation and reaction to the perceived failures of second wave feminism. This movement began in 1990s and extended into postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism and gender studies. The feminist thinkers associated with this movement advocated social justice for women. Similarly, literary scholars believe that there is the fourth wave feminism which started in 2012 is associated with technology like facebook, twitter, instagram and other social networking. The campaigns like "Every Sexism project" and "Me too movement" is associated with it. The Me Too Movement was a movement against sexual harassments and assaults women face in work places and other places. It was Tarana Burke, a social activist who had used "Me too" in 2006, on myspace social network as a part of campaign to promote "empowerment through empathy." Some of the earliest key concepts that encouraged feminist literary theory to expand its horizon's into wider and broad areas will be briefly touched in the below discussion.

It is commonly regarded that actual theoretical foundation of feminist criticism was laid by Simone de Beauvoir. In this book, *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir claims that femininity is not inherent but a social construct developed through the long process of socialization. She says that the inferiority of women was mainly due to the three factors. First women were always taught to help men and thus derive their existence in relation to them. Secondly, women were encouraged to externalize the aspects of femininity such as docility, selflessness, beauty to validate themselves in a society. Thirdly, women have enjoyed lesser rights than men. Therefore, she argues that it was not women's inferiority that rendered women as historically insignificant rather it is the historical insignificance that doomed women to an inferior state. According to her women is not born but made into women through the process of socialization which is predominately male centric and that has reduced women to second sex and to the inferior and subordinate state. Simone de Beauvoir notes:

*One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that*



*the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine*

Since, the main focus of feminist theory remains on the premise that from the beginning of human civilization the world of literature has been dominated by male writers and women's writing was excluded from the mainstream culture and literature. Women were actually discredited to perform social roles in the public or private sector which would have enhanced their economic condition. They were also discouraged to pursue literary ambitions by patriarchal structures of society, a belief in men's natural superiority. There was a need for women writers and theorists to challenge the oppressive doctrine and practice of patriarchy with alternative narratives which would provide a safe zone to women for exploring and creating a distinctive artistic genre. To fill this gap, Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), originally written as a lecture which she was invited to deliver at Girton College Cambridge on the theme 'Woman and Fiction' in 1928 laid building blocks for feminist criticism. Her treatise takes the charge of inferiority leveled against women and presents a powerful materialistic analysis of women's oppression. She argues that women's book is not written as men would write it. She also maintains that artistic genius is not a miraculous gift that one is born with, rather it develops among educated and leisured class when two criteria's are fulfilled. The first is room of one's own which symbolizes an independent space for women as an individual. The second is financial independence. When these two criteria's are fulfilled women would excel in both social and literary endeavours. She also gave the concept of androgyny. While clarifying it, she argues that although physical body is divided into two sexes, yet it is possible for the mind to contain the characteristics of the both. She was actually inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's concept of androgyny who had said that 'the mind of a true artist is androgynous.'

The American Feminist critic Elaine Showalter challenged Woolf's concept of androgyny. In her essay, *Toward Feminist Poetics* (1979), she gave the concept of Gynocriticism as an alternative framework for the analysis of women's writing. The concept of Gynocriticism focuses on the historical study of women's literary texts written by female authors. It takes two strands- the ideological or phallogocentric approach where women were actually readers and consumers of literary texts. This criticism critiques the misinterpretation and stereotypical image of women depicted in literature written by men. The second is Gynocriticism, a mode of literature where women are authors and producers of literary texts.

In 1970s several other feminist thinkers produced landmark literary texts which helped the feminist criticism to flourish in every direction. The common point to all these works was to



vocalize women's inner as well as physical experiences in order to give a voice as well as means through which women can be elevated from the current status to a position where they can explore not only their own unique and autonomous identity but also establish a literary canon of their own.

### **Conclusion:**

Therefore, 'feminism' was a social movement, initiated through a series of resistance movements against the notion of patriarchy, social inequality and role of capitalism in the oppression of women. In the beginning it was disjointed and incoherent system of opposition to phallographic thinking and practice, but now feminist theory is well established field of critical inquiry and study. The scope of feminist literary theory is not only to encompass a mode of re-claiming, and establishing women's autonomous identity in social and as well in literary spheres, but also advance parallel to male centric literary discourse. Thus, today we encompass vast and diverse range of feminist thinkers who apply post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, Marxist and postcolonial approaches to de-centre male ideology in order to define, establish and achieve women's social justice in all spheres of life.

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