

#(for M.A. sem 2)

Feminist Literary Criticism

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Feminist literary criticism is a development and movement in critical theory and in the evaluation of literature. It is not entirely new rather it has its roots in ancient Greek literature, especially in the works of Sappho and Aristophanes but it became more prominent by the late 1960s. It endeavours to interpret and reinterpret women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature - novel, poetry and drama. It also questions the dominant patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations and evaluation of literature. It also attacks men's attitude to women and the place assigned to women by men in both society and literature. As literature mirrors/reflects the society and also creates the society so it is important that literature should also be represented by women. By and large women depicted in literature are men's creations. They are structured by patriarchy. They have been assigned their roles in the society. They were portrayed as angels, goddesses, horse, obedient wife, and mother figures. They were denied social, religious, political and financial powers as well as the opportunity to have education and profession. Patriarchy had enslaved them as patriarchy believed that women were innately inferior to men. This belief of patriarchy is sexist in nature. It was due to women's struggle in the 20th century for political rights that feminist criticism arose in any systematic way. Feminist literary criticism is the direct product of women's movement of the 1960s was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action as depicted in the folk tradition and classical literature, the works of Mary Wollstonecraft discussing male writers like Milton, Pope and Rousseau. Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911) portray unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternative to marriage and motherhood. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in one of the sections discusses the portrayal of women in the novels of DH Lawrence. Prior to 1960s the text that discuss the issues of women form the first wave Feminist criticism in which Woolf and de Beauvoir are the leading feminist critics.

Feminism developed as a substantial force, in America and Britain in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The women's rights and women's suffrage movements were the crucial determinants in shaping this phase and put emphasis on social, political, and economic reforms. The second wave (1960s to 1980s) dealt with the inequality of laws as well as an official inequalities. The third wave of feminism (1990s-current) arose from the perceived failures of the second wave.

The early 20th century feminist criticism encompasses a vast series of concerns – rewriting of literary history so as to include the contributions of women; the tracing of female literary tradition; theories of sexuality and sexual difference; drawing on Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the Social Sciences; the representation of women in male literature; the role of gender both literary creation and literary criticism; the connection between gender and various aspects of literary form; and above all of persistent concern with both experience and language. The feminists think that language that man use is not suitable to them as it is dominated by male concepts and values. They want to evolve a female language but at the same time some of them want to modify the male language. As the significance of language rests on its expression of Mel ways of thinking as is evident from Aristotle Ian division of the world into demarcated entities based on binary oppositions such as men versus women , black versus white , master versus slave , feminists have rejected these divisive ways of viewing the world. They put emphasis on unity rather than opposition. They recognise the categories of binary opposition as cultural and ideological constructions made by male. They do not deny the biological differences in physical size, shape and body chemistry that make men *naturally* superior to women. These differences do not mean that men are more intelligent more logical, more courageous or better leaders, better writers for better philosophers. They distinguish between *sex* and *gender*. *Sex* refers to the biological construction as male or female whereas *gender* refers to the cultural or ideological programming as feminine or masculine. Women are not born feminine and men are not born masculine. Man has defined the social system and has given women the inferior position so women have been denied economic, political or social power. The feminists think that the position occupied by women in a patriarchal society is

culturally, not *biologically* produced. As a result women oppressed by traditional gender roles, they are patriarchal women. It is against this patriarchal programming of the society that feminist movement came into being.

After Mary Wollstonecraft the two women Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir analysed the problems of women in their systematic studies. They are the pioneers of the first wave of feminist criticism.

Virginia Woolf (1882 - 1941)

Virginia Woolf, The pioneer of feminist literary criticism, has raised some of the important issues such as the social and economic context of women's writing, the gendered nature of language, the need to establish a female literary tradition, and the societal construction of gender.

Virginia Woolf, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, a noted literary critic, a friend of a galaxy of eminent writers such as Meredith, Henry James, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and George Eliot, was educated at home by her father. Her father had a rich library which proved very fruitful to her. Her mother Julia Jackson Duckworth was a member of a publishing family. Being the daughter of scholar parents, Virginia Woolf could not receive formal education at school and college. And this had a deep impact on her mind. Her mother died when Virginia was in her teens. Her half sister, who was senior to her, also died two years later. Her own sister Vanessa influenced her a lot. The death of her father in 1904 and of her brother in 1906 put her into unspeakable troubles. She was sexually abused by her half brother.

Woolf moved to Bloomsbury, which later on became the centre of activities of the important writers and artists known as the Bloomsbury group. From 1905 she began her career as a writer for the *Times Literary Supplement*. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, who was a political activist.

Virginia Woolf wrote a number of novels and essays. Her concerns with feminist thematics are dominantly presented in her book *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929. It is divided into 6 chapters, each chapter discussing the different aspects of feminism. It is based on 2 lectures she delivered in Newnham College and Girton College (both under Cambridge University) in 1928. She attracted the attention of the

girl students at graduation level to the obstacles and prejudices that have hindered women writers. She separated women as objects of representation and women as authors of representation in literature. She believed that literature had been made by men out of their needs for their own uses. She urged the women to recognise their worth and give a shape to their career and ambitions. It is an irony that woman who encouraged the other women to awake and arise with her views handwritings committed suicide in 1941 by drowning herself in a river. It is also an irony that two other writers Anne Sexton and Plath champion the causes also committed suicide.

A Room of One's Own chapter 1

Virginia Woolf creates a character that had been to a college to deliver a lecture on "Women and Fiction". The speaker uses the phrase '*a room of one's own*' in the very first sentence. 'Room' is a metaphor with various meanings. Speaking on the topic the speaker says that there may be various dimensions of the topic and one may speak on women writers and pay tribute to Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Bronte sisters, George Eliot and Mrs. Gaskell. One may also speak on the other dimension women and their contribution to the field of fiction and the third dimension might be the women and the fiction written about them all the fourth would be all the earlier 3 mixed together. The speaker prefers the fourth one i.e. the issue - women, fictions written by them, women created/portrayed by them in their fictions. But she says that in order to be able to write – "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Here to things – money and room are very important. Money symbolises economic independence and room symbolises a place of privacy where one can have peace of mind.

Explaining her point of women's need for money and room, the speaker says that she sat on the bank of a river at Oxbridge, (a fictional University suggesting Oxford and Cambridge) pondering the questions of women and fiction. She represents her musings metaphorically in terms of fishing: "thought had led its line down into the stream" of the mind, where it drifts in the current and waits for the tug of the idea. She gets it but the approach of the beadle (University security guard) says to her that women are not allowed to walk on to the grass. She is carried back to the gravel path open (mixture of

gravel and sand used for roads), remarking that while no “very great harm” was done she has lost her “little fish” of Idea.

She remembers an essay by Charles Lamb in the library of Oxbridge and wants to view the manuscript but the library staff tells her that “ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a fellow of the college of furnished with the letter of introduction.” She gets irritated and decides not to visit the library again “never will I ask for that hospitality again”. She hears the sound of organ music and sees the university people assembling for a service in the chapel. She remains outside weighed down with the feeling of her seclusion.

She reflects on the history of the university and things of materials, labour and money upon which it was founded and is being maintained. Her reflections are disturbed by the sound of the clock. She describes the lunch served at the college where wine and dessert along with various items of food was served in abundance. Her attention is again distracted by the sight of a tailless cat. The sight of that abrupt and truncated animal looks odd and prompts her to sense that something is lacking in the lunchtime conversation and atmosphere. She then speculates the change which has taken place. Before World War I at the time of lunch the poems of Tennyson, Rossetti used to be recited and talked off but these days i.e. post-war period, new poetry imaging out of disillusionment it is difficult for the general readers to appreciate.

The narrator describes a meal at Fernham (represents new college for women). The meal served her is poor in quality the lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes. She says that it one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. She retires to the room of her friend Mary Seton with vague feeling of discontent. She is upset to see the discrimination done to women's College by the administration. Where male universities are flooded with all sorts of facilities, women's colleges are not supported generously.

Virginia Woolf has raised a lot of issues in the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own*. She observes that the path of women is very difficult. To earn money was and is difficult for them and even if in some cases it is, the law has denied them the right to pause what money they earned. Everything belongs to their husbands. Describing their condition she says “not a penny could be spared for ‘amenities’; for partridges and wine,

beadles and turf, books and cigars, libraries and leisure.” Women are unable to take interest in education because that typically lacks the necessary independent means. She says, “Making a fortune and bearing 13 children no human being could stand it.” She concludes with the remarks “How unpleasant it is to be looked out... and how it’s was perhaps to be locked out... and how it’s worse perhaps to be locked in.” On men’s side is safety and prosperity and with women it is poverty and insecurity. What a contrast!

Virginia Woolf’s feminism emphasizes that women need and opportunity to use their genius. They also need money e and privacy e so that they can have mental freedom to create art as intellectual freedom rests on financial freedom.

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