



Feminist Criticism: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Feminist criticism constitutes a theoretical and political approach to literature and culture that examines the representation, construction, and marginalization of women within patriarchal systems. This article provides a comprehensive overview of feminist criticism, tracing its historical evolution through distinct waves of activism and theoretical development. It delineates key figures, foundational texts, and central concepts, from Mary Wollstonecraft's early arguments for women's education to Judith Butler's postmodern theories of gender performativity. The analysis further distinguishes between major schools of thought, notably Anglo-American and French feminist criticism, and explores significant critical concepts such as *écriture féminine*, the anxiety of authorship, and intersectionality. By synthesizing these diverse strands, the article argues that feminist criticism is not merely an analytical method but a transformative practice committed to exposing gendered power dynamics and advocating for social and intellectual equity.

Keywords: Feminist Criticism, Waves of Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Performativity, *Écriture Féminine*, Intersectionality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist criticism is a mode of literary and cultural analysis grounded in the principles of feminism, which advocates for the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. It operates on the premise that much of the established literary canon and cultural production reflects and reinforces a male-dominated (patriarchal) perspective. Consequently, feminist criticism seeks to re-examine accepted works to reveal embedded gender stereotypes, recover marginalized women's voices, and challenge the ideological assumptions of patriarchy (Tyson, 2006). A feminist, therefore, is any individual, regardless of gender, who works towards these goals of equality and critique.

1. Historical Foundations and Waves of Feminism

The intellectual history of feminist thought is often charted in distinct, though overlapping, "waves."

First-Wave Feminism (c. 1830s – 1920s): Focused on legal inequalities, particularly suffrage, and access to education. A foundational text is Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which argued for women's rational capacity and the necessity of education. The term "first-wave" itself was coined later by Martha Lear in 1968.

Second-Wave Feminism (1960s – 1980s): Expanded the critique to broader cultural and political structures of patriarchy, including sexuality, family, the workplace, and reproductive rights. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which critiqued the idealized domestic role of women, is a seminal text. This wave also brought issues like domestic violence and marital rape into public discourse.

Third-Wave Feminism (1990s – 2000s): Emerged in response to the perceived limitations of the second wave, emphasizing diversity, individuality, and intersectionality—the interconnected nature of gender with race, class, and sexuality. The term was popularized by Rebecca Walker's 1992 article. Third-wave feminists engaged ambivalently with themes like pornography and sex work, and embraced queer theory to deconstruct fixed notions of gender (Butler, 1990).

Fourth-Wave Feminism (c. 2010 – Present): Characterized by its use of digital technology and social media for activism, calling out sexism, and advocating for gender justice. It focuses intensively on issues of sexual harassment, body positivity, and transgender rights, and is deeply informed by an intersectional framework (Cochrane, 2013). Ecofeminism, which links the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women (a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne), also finds strong resonance here.

2. Key Theorists and Concepts

Feminist criticism has been shaped by pivotal thinkers who established its core methodologies.

Foundational Voices: Early critics like Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), analyzed the material and social constraints on women writers. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), famously argued, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," positing gender as a social construct.

Anglo-American vs. French Feminism: A significant theoretical division exists between these two schools. Anglo-American feminism (e.g., Elaine Showalter, Kate Millett) often focused on practical criticism, recovering women's literary history, and analyzing representations of female experience. Showalter (1977) outlined three phases of women's writing: the *Feminine* (1840-1880, imitation of male norms), the *Feminist* (1880-1920, protest), and the *Female* (1920 onward, self-discovery).

In contrast, French feminist theory, influenced by psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, is more abstract. Julia Kristeva distinguished between the patriarchal, logical **Symbolic** order of language and a pre-Oedipal, rhythmic **Semiotic** dimension associated with the maternal, which can disrupt symbolic discourse. Hélène Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), championed *écriture féminine* ("feminine writing"), urging women to write through their bodies to subvert phallogocentric language.

Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The relationship is contested. While Kate Millett condemned Freudian theory as patriarchal, Juliet Mitchell defended its utility for understanding the construction of femininity. This tension underscores feminism's complex engagement with foundational discourses.

Contemporary Expansions: Alice Walker proposed **Womanism** to center the experiences of Black women, stating "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Walker, 1983). Judith Butler's theory of **gender performativity** argues that gender is not an innate identity but a repeated performance enacted under societal constraints (Butler, 1990). Adrienne Rich's concept of **compulsory heterosexuality** (1980) critiques the institution as a political force that upholds male dominance.

3. Core Critical Approaches

Feminist critics employ various strategies:

- **Images of Women Criticism:** Analyzing stereotypical portrayals of women in male-authored texts.
- **Gynocriticism:** Pioneered by Showalter, this involves studying women as writers, constructing a female literary tradition.

- **Intersectional Analysis:** Examining how gender oppression interacts with racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination.
- **Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism:** Using psychoanalytic concepts to explore the female psyche and textual unconscious.
- **Materialist Feminist Criticism:** Focusing on the economic and social conditions that shape women's lives and literary production.

Conclusion

Feminist criticism has evolved into a profound intellectual and social force, systematically challenging patriarchal hegemony across literature, culture, and society. From Wollstonecraft's advocacy for education to Butler's deconstruction of gender itself, each wave has expanded the scope of inquiry and struggle. The movement's journey—from demanding basic rights to interrogating the very constructs of identity and leveraging digital tools for global activism—demonstrates its dynamic and responsive nature. While Anglo-American criticism prioritized recovering women's voices and experiences, French feminism provided potent theoretical tools through psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Together, they have fundamentally altered how we read, write, and interpret texts. Contemporary feminist thought, through frameworks like womanism, ecofeminism, and queer theory, continues to offer pathways for resistance and creative expression. Ultimately, feminist criticism affirms that literature and culture are never neutral; they are inscribed with power relations. To read from a feminist perspective is to uncover these relations, recuperate silenced narratives, and envision a future where identity is not a limitation but a possibility for liberation and equity.

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