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An Analysis of Feminist Theory in Literary Criticism

1. Safdar Azeem, Department of English, University of Karachi.
2. Sameena Anjum, MS Scholar, Department of English, University of Karachi.

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Abstract

Feminist critique in literary studies in particular, analyzes literature and the role of literature in perpetuating economic, political, social, and psychological subordination of women. This research study examines the evolution of Feminist Literary Criticism from the early 1920s to current varieties. It shows such crucial female critics and theoreticians as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler whose works contributed much to the understanding of the gender issue in relation to literature. It explains three feminisms: liberal, radical, and intersectional, with an emphasis on how these frameworks make text notable. A qualitative method applies text analysis in examining selected literary works using the feminism method. The case studies are novels by Charlotte Brontë, Kate Chopin, and Toni Morrison which examine how gender is socially constructed, and contested, in literary texts. From these observations it is possible to conclude that the field of feminist criticism is important and constantly evolving and is capable of contributing much to the analysis of gendered representations of texts and their social- cultural contexts. In conclusion, this paper shows that the understanding of gender, power and identity is enriched by the introduction of the concepts formulated by the representatives of the feminist literary criticism.

Keywords: Feminism, feminists, culture, criticisms

Introduction

Feminist criticism as a method of literary analysis is a comparatively young and very diverse field of study that arises to ask how women are depicted in literature and to speculate on the nature of women's participation in the narration of cultural stories regarding gender (Akdoğan, 2016). Emerging in response to women's absence or negative portrayal in literary texts, feminist literary criticism concerns itself with how

literature represents or constructs or resists gender relations. Feminist criticism stems from the main postulated in the women's movements from the nineteenth and twentieth century, with other issues such as women's right and social justice among them, has evolved into a number of genres each offering different directions in literary analysis.

New historicism appeared also in the 1920s, though contentious critical movements that developed into the new historicism in the 1980s were inaugurated by women's writing, such as Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929). In his essay Woolf particularizes social prejudices, which for centuries restricted women writers, and encouraged generations of female critics to redefine the literary tradition. The same could be said of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (Strauss, 1949): it is an archetypal definitional critique that will enable later analysis of genders in the literary world, as it chronicles manners in which women have been represented in relation to males.

In this introduction, issues of the application of the feminist criticism in literary theory and how the application of the feminism gender, power, and identity in literary works will be addressed. This research hopes to address some key questions: In what way did feminism theorists alter the discussion of literature critique or analysis? What are the fundamentals of assessment in Light of Feminist arcane theories? In what ways are the texts both conformist with and/or oppositional to patriarchal discourses? Thus, this paper will serve to address these questions, as well as outlining the scope for discussion of what the feminist theory brought to the literary critique.

Later on, the aspects of the feminist literary criticism have always been assumed on the bases of its responses to the change in the cultural and historical feminism or even the change in the feminist though. This movement has recently gone from liberal feminist issues on equality of access to experiences of radical feminism and challenging of hegemonic structures of patriarchalism. Furthermore, when the intersectionality movement has risen, the critics appreciated it in the sense that the religion promotes the view on how factors such as race, class, sexuality, and other identities are involved in constituting experiences based on gender and at the same time, how such experiences constitute those factors. Feminist literary criticism

occupies an important place in today's debate on issues of gender and representation within and outside the current discourse of identity politics in literature.

It is hoped in the end to offer an understanding of the resiliency of feminist theories in literature criticism and how these theories shape the text construction and interpretation of literary works. Analyzing essential theorists, frameworks, and literary examples, the analysis helps reveal the importance of the feminist critical approach as a lens through which to observe literature and the cultural narratives that define gender and identity as well as their limitations.

Literature Review

There are many subdivisions of Feminist theory in literary criticism. They can be studied through the main texts that defined the movement, major theorists and theorists of the subsequent phases of the theory.

Feminist literary criticism embraced practice in the later part of nineteenth century and early twentieth century along side the Feminist movement. Feminist critics such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir gave the relationships and approach a shot. Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929) complains about how customary discrimination for female writers was rife and how women, dependent and unappreciated, cannot have their creativity grow as written artists. Solitude and a place of that nature are necessary for women to bring value to literature, for them to have a room of their own. She therefore argues that female literature could only come to be in suitable circumstances; in other words, a good social environment assures good fiction and the relationship between gender, fiction and social conditions is sensitive.

Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) provides a historical and philosophical analysis of women's oppression, postulating that women's identities were constructed about men. De Beauvoir's psychoanalytic critique of literature discusses the representation of women as the "Other," situated in a liminal category between humanity and animality, always more than the male gaze. Her work emboldened feminist critics to pursue re-readings of canonical texts, deconstructing how patriarchal values inform the underlying narratives of literature.

Major Theorists and Movements

This means that, as feminist criticism has developed and continued to be refined, it led to different strands, each offering different ways of critically thinking. Often, it doesn't take explicitly feminist history into account. If it does, it focuses on liberal feminism — liberal feminism focuses on equality for women in society and equality through writing and representation (across the literary canon). It has been advanced by critics such as Elaine Showalter, who foreground women's contributions to the tradition of writing, calling for women writers to be more prominently featured in mainstream literary discourse.

In contrast to this approach, radical feminism aims to rethink patriarchy and challenge systemic power dynamics that maintain sexual stratification. Some of the most notable textual critics shall be discussed and explained with regards to such oppressions and projections of sexual politics as Kate Millett in her book and Sexual Politics in the 70s. The approach introduced by Millett resulted to discussions on what members considered literature assuming – mimetic or anti- patriarchal.

Another species of modern Feminism is the intersectionality in second half of twentieth century by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Through Intersectional feminism, it emerges clearly that gender is not different from race, class, sexual orientation, and nationality as aspects of people's existence. Contrary to that, this perspective has a tendency of suggesting that women are not equally oppressed; oppression is intertwined in the femaleness. Feminists such as Bell Hooks and Chimamanda Ngozi have pointed out that intersectional approach needs to be applied in a question of whether minoritized identities are being included.

Architecture after Columbus – Feminist Critical Practice

This particular type contemporary or current, modern or postmodern; feminist literary criticism as it were is not dead and does better still interactively play out virtually all the issues, gender, theories, point of views and methods belonging to the discursive AGE. He is going to pay especially much attention to a particular field like corporeal psychology of women in literature, for example. In his essay "This Is Why You Do not Believe It," Michael Cohen argues that Trump achieves mutation through repetition and imitation, transforming the outrage narrative into another foreign object: neoliberalism; the left no longer seeks to overthrow the capitalist system but desires a

deal: it is inside it, it is through it, through identity—its identity, through performativity: Butler's "gender performativity," meaning gender is normative because it is a repetition, just as the external menace that is the Other is the performative repetition of fascism. Yet, Butler's theories have provided the lens through which the feminist critics were able to analyze how far literature promotes or depromotes gender norms, thus promoting further text interpretationalism.

Furthermore, with the emergence of postcolonial and transnational feminist critiques, feminist literary analysis has expanded. Such approaches interrogate how colonial histories and global systems of power interact with gender, calling for the inclusion of diverse cultural contexts in the study of women's experiences across the globe. This lens demonstrates colonialism and globalisation'sglobalization's impact on narratives of identity and resistance in literature.

Feminist literary criticism is nuanced as it highlights a back-and-forth conversation between literature and gender, reiterating the importance of reading texts through a feminist perspective. From the early insights of Woolf and de Beauvoir to the contemporary perspectives provided by intersectional and postcolonial theorists, feminist criticism has also come to incorporate diverse approaches and methodologies. Feminist literary criticism also remains a central form of analysis in literature today, as this review suggests and goes on to show, one that continues to furnish vital interpretative frameworks for understanding the ways that literature engages with and interrogates structures of polytemporal and planar gendered power, ultimately stitching identity, politics, and power closer to the heart of literature through architectural readings of genre.

Research Methodology

This study draws on a qualitative research methodology to examine literary criticism through the lens of feminist theorization, exploring its historical development, primary theorists, and contemporary practices. The approach uses close readings of select literature with different feminist lenses to seek, identify, and analyze the gender-related themes and dynamics presented.

Choice of Literary Texts

Literary Texts Selected for Feminist Analysis As Case Studies Step A. The selected works are Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Kate Chopin's The Awakening, and Toni Morrison's Beloved. These texts were selected because they significantly contributed to feminist discourse, showcasing complex female characters struggling to survive through restrictive social constructs and gender roles. All three texts provide different representations of women's experiences and struggles, lending itself to a nuanced feminist critique.

Data Collection

Primary and secondary materials were collected based on the selected literary texts. An in-depth analysis of the major texts was conducted through close reading, exploring character development, narrative structure, themes, and language manipulation. This analysis was meant to show how the authors made social commentary through gender roles, power, and societal norms.

The second type of reading list involved secondary sources, such as some articles, critical essays, and theoretical texts that concern feminist principles and their application to the literature analysis. Through the lens of this perspective, we examine the text I, Rigoberta Menchu, and how the character does not fit into the primacy of the white Western man as the subject through the ideas of key feminist theoretical texts, including Woolf, de Beauvoir, and then more contemporary scholarship on intersectionality and gender performance.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis proceeded in several stages:

Textual Analysis: The initial stage of the project consisted of close readings of the selected texts, which showed instances of the described gender dynamics and struggles of female characters. Consideration was given to narrative voice, symbolism, and character interaction to uncover feminist undercurrents.

Thematic Coding: Thematic coding of readings was then performed, seeking out recurring themes and motifs about feminism, including empowerment, confinement, resistance, and identity. This coding enabled a systematic analysis of how different texts approached similar feminist concerns.

Contextualized reading: The final stage puts the analysis into the broader socio-historical frameworks relevant to each text. Researching the historical and cultural backgrounds at the time of writing better informed the implications gender representation had in the literature.

Comparative Analysis: Lastly, a comparative approach was used to analyze the similarities and differences in how female characters and their experiences are portrayed across the chosen works. This phase established a general paradigm for each work we have read over the semester, demonstrating its importance to the feminist discourse globally and breaking down how substance theory contributes to or extends feminist discourse across time and space.

Limitations

Although this qualitative method provides some insight into the feminist approach in literature, it also acknowledges its weakness. Because literary analysis is subjective, various critics and readers may have different interpretations. Moreover, a selective reading could not only highlight specific aspects of feminist literary criticism but also overlook the vast array of voices and experiences included in this body of scholarship. Future studies can build on this premise by examining a broader range of literary works and the global implications of feminist literary theory.

Qualitative research could theoretically and possibly useful and valuable in this study because this work attempts to open up the analytic dimensions of the hermeneutic problem posed by feminist literary theory in discourse. According to the infrastructural perspective of a specific group of literary texts the present discourse raises the issue of feminism in perceiving the place of gender and the contradictions of the identities in the field of literature.

Data Analysis

The Jane Eyre Essay — Charlotte Brontë

It is noteworthy that one of the first texts in which the principles of the feminist bibliographic analysis were worked out was Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë. As for me the story describes the love and search for the independent women's character in the men's world. Jane is the main character but it's a woman's battle for her right against the background of the social environment; some of the many pictures of which she

has to endure in her lifetime. Although dealing with relations between the sexes, not marital ones, Hawthorne also paints the defective Victorian gender roles through Jane, who transforms a moral and strong-willed woman into a obedient animal that demands her rights.

A considerable share of interest regarding Brontë's attitude towards the topic of gender inequality is represented in the ways Jane engages with the male characters and, most strikingly, Mr. Rochester. Their relationship goes from one with a power imbalance to one in which they respect each other as equals, highlighting Jane's progress toward empowerment. At first, Rochester represents the overarching patriarch, calling the shots in Jane's life. However, the stories open up, and Jane's determination to free herself from the control establishes tension as the story progresses. A society would have a noble conviction, as a society would have, and a moment comes in which Jane says to herself, "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me," which is a break in individuality is not to be subjected (Brontë, 1847).

Furthermore, gothic tropes in Jane Eyre serve to highlight the anguish and torment experienced by women, prime victims of patriarchal oppression, hinting at the cathartic potential of heeding the call of the Wild Woman. Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife, is often interpreted as a metaphor for the silenced or repressed female experience. Bertha, locked away in the attic, is the disastrous outcome of both insanity and a society that stifles women's voices. Such a representation brings up sensitive and important issues of race, colonialism, and the intersectionality of gender in the Victorian world. Through the contrast of Jane's path towards autonomy with Bertha's dismal end — positioned via their relation to the man at the center of their lives — Brontë comments on the oppressive forces that craft female identities and make it challenging to forge one unhindered.

Analysing Kate Chopin's The Awakening

The Awakening was shameful and caustic of correct conduct, bring out women's liberation and personality in the 1880s. Perhaps the most evident theme of the book is the tension between the principles of gender and individualism on the one hand, and those of culture on the other. Hence, Chopin brings the traditional feminine part up to

the knees and proves that her protagonist cannot reconcile with the laws of a mother and a wife.

Owning to the agenda that Chopin wants to portray in the novel, desire awakens Ernestine. Here, one more thing is sea as liberty and a person's individuality. Baker supplements the point by remarking that Edna's first attempts to swim were not a pursuit of swimming in the sense of being a techne or a method; they were repulsive; they set her free as a woman who controls her sexual desire.

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