

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Feminist Concerns in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

Dr. Padmasree Nidumola

Professor,
Dept. of English
JNU, Jaipur
&

Manisha
Ph.D Scholar
JNU, Jaipur

Abstract:

The aim of this present paper is to study Mary Wollstonecraft's and Simone De Beauvoir's works through the perspectives of feminism. Feminism means both a political stance and a theory focusing on gender as a analyzing subject when reading cultural practices and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. It's assumptions is that gender roles are social and pre-determined which forces women to think, talk and act in a particular way which is chosen for them by the society. Feminist theory argues that woman is represented as weak, innocent, docile, emotional and seduction and influences those social conditions where she is treated as a sex-object or a procreating machine and she doesn't have financial rights, political power and is abused at every step. Mary Wollstonecraft was the first woman who provided the first major theoretical exploration of gender and inequality. She rejected the prevalent view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. But she proposed that the cause of this is the lack of education which kept women in a secondary position and as an object. Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir also stated that women are considered inferior to men is all due to patriarchy. She argued that men are able to mystify women. This feminist theory analyses gender roles as they are shown in cultural forms like literature, cinema, advertisements and how they (women) are connected to actual life and social conditions. According to feminists, woman's body has been represented as mother, seductive, sexual and material. The status of male is the standard model for all things human. On the contrary, woman is never seen as anything other than an object and a secondary figure in comparison of male. The most concerned issue of feminist writers is that woman should be located as subject of her own self, desire and identity rather than as an object of the male.

Keywords: Feminism, Inequality, Patriarchy, Identity, Inferiority.

Introduction:

Feminist literary criticism is essentially linked to the political movement for equality of the sexes and the end to discrimination against women. In works of art, feminist criticism wants to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society. Feminists thought that text is a mode of expression for them where actual power relations between men and women are played out. The key political and theoretical stance of Feminism is this. The inequalities that existing between men and women are social but not natural not pre-ordained but created by men themselves in order that they can maintain their power over women. The family religions, education, the arts, knowledge system all are social and cultural 'structures' that enable the lasted reinforcement of

this inequality. Men with their ability to pertain power so that the structure convince the woman to be subordinated. Cultural structures also providing a system of beliefs to prepare the women to give their consent to be subordinate. The works of feminist theory is to unpack these ideologies of dominance.

Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Margaret Fuller in *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of their Own* (1977) wrote of the need to rethink the role of women and social oppression against them. They portrayed in their works the importance of education to high up the status of women. In the early twentieth century, Olive Schreiner, Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), and Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) have written on the gender questions from the perspective of and oriented towards issues like education, marriage, economics, sexuality and morals.

Feminists assume that a literary text operates as the lines of power struggle that exist between men and women. The text naturalizes the oppression of women through its stereotypical representation of women as weak, vulnerable, seductress obstacle, sexual object of the male desire. They argue that literary texts reproduce social biases that see women as only the “other” of the male. The women are typecast as “mother nature” thus reducing her to the perpetually giving, forgiving nature that demands nothing is willing to suffer anything for her son.

Sex is biological while ‘gender’ is socially constructed. There is no necessary link between gender and biological sex. Both masculinity and femininity are coercive categories that strait-jacket men and women. As in Simone de Beauvoir famous statement, a woman is not born, she becomes is made a woman. There is relationship between gender dualism, sexuality and sexual orientation. Sexuality is born from cultural processes and forces. We are not born gay, Lesbian or heterosexual.

Disciplines such as psychoanalysis or philosophy helps retain the hierarchy of male/female. These disciplines must be studied to expose their ideological biases. In its scope, feminist criticism is political. It demonstrates the link between the economic conditions, political hegemony; work-place conditions that influence inform and create gender oppression against women.

Elaine Showalter’s works have pioneered in creating a woman-centered literary history in *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985), *Speaking of Gender and Gynocriticism*. Look at the history, styles themselves genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamic of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or collective female career and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition. The 1970s have been marked by a shift of critical attention from such patriarchal texts to “gynotexts” (text by women).

In the development of women’s writing Showalter identifies three major phases The Feminine phase (1840-1880), The Feminist phase (1880-1890) and The Female phase (1950s). The Feminine phase is dated from 1840-1880. In this phase, women writers imitated the modes of male writers. They adopted patriarchal aesthetic and social values and finally perpetuated through their work. As Elaine Showalter points out that nineteenth century’s women writers

adopted masculine names or emphasized their material status in *Mrs. Gaskell* of George Eliot. The daily lives of women within the family and community is explored by these writers.

The Feminist phase which is dated from 1880 to 1890, later extends to around 1920s. This phase is characterized as a protest phase by Showalter where women authors rebelled against the Victorian sexual stereotypes. In that time, women began to explore their position in terms of work, class and family. This phase is marked by the demand for imitation of an “all-out” war between the sexes.

The female phase follows the feminist in the twentieth century is characterized by the woman writer’s search for her own voice and identity as oppressed to the identity “granted” here by patriarchy. Showalter perceives the post 1960s as the heightened female phase. Showalter detects Freudian and Marxist influences in authors of the female phase.

With the arrival of printing in early modern Europe, the level of literacy changed which meant that more women read about others lives and wrote about their own. However European feminism as theory might be traced back to the writings of eighteenth century of Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft discussed about the age when the labour of men in every stream whether in the field or in literature was privileged over that of women. At that time, Wollstonecraft provided the first major theoretical exploration of gender inequality.

In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft rejected the prevalent view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. She proposed that this unequal nature of gender relations was because the lack of education due to which women are kept in a secondary position. Playing a crucial role in society namely bringing up children women must be treated equals. Women should strive to become companions rather than mere wives to their husbands. This charge is only possible through getting of education. Some male thinkers like Rousseau argued that women did not need an education but Wollstonecraft attacked this type of thinking. She unpacked the image of the woman as a creature of sentiment arguing that the woman prone to excessive emotions abandoned rationality. Wollstonecraft argued that this thought kept the women subordinate. Under the influence of the ideas of the European Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft suggested that rationality and reason must be given importance over sensibility and feeling.

In the subordination of women, socializing process plays a significant role. Wollstonecraft was one of the first thinkers to propose that gender roles are social but not natural. Which means the love of jewellery, fashion, romance or beauty in women was not natural. But the women has been socialized and trained to believe that these are the things what make her truly feminine. These characteristics are associated with the feminine and are giving social values so that she fits into the category of the feminine. This shift from femininity as natural to femininity as social is writer’s major contribution. Wollstonecraft is placed one of the pioneers who moved away from a biological view of gender to a social one where social norms, laws, values, cultural particular forms of behavior are seen by her from women. In Wollstonecraft’s critique, the woman had little choice but to adopt these forms and norms. If she didn’t do this she would be treated as a monster a freak and as a witch. In this way, the woman consented to feminine roles and to her own subordination.

On the other hand when Wollstonecraft was radical in getting education as a means of 'improving' the women's position in society with all this, she was hesitant to upset the gender hierarchies. For example, Wollstonecraft believed that men did have superior virtues. She saw education as improvement and proposing a clear distinction between genders. Similarly, Margaret Fuller in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) believed that education was the means of emancipation for women. Education, employment and political rights were key planks of Fuller and these were championed throughout her life. Fuller, unlike Wollstonecraft did not support specific gender roles. Her belief was that women need not be confined to the domestic duties and there are no 'feminine' roles.

Simone De Beauvoir's status as a feminist has always been open to debate the reason of this lies in the contexts in which the work circulated. Beauvoir was writing in the late 1940s and her views were truly radical. But with the passage of time and by the time when she became to be popular in the English-speaking world, many ideas in her work were common and didn't attract attention as radical. In *The Second Sex* (published in French in 1949 and its English translation came in 1984).

De Beauvoir argued that men are able to mystify women. This mystification and stereotyping was instrumental in creating patriarchy. In change women accepted this stereotype and were instruments to their own oppression. Further, she argued that women were always the negative of the men. Where man was the ideal, the norm and the woman the deviant or the other, who tried to be perfect as much like the man as possible. When women are measured by the standard of men, they are found 'inferior'. This process is called of 'othering' where women will be seen not as independent or unique but as a flawed version of the male. Both man and woman are permanently engaged in this subject-other relation where the man is the subject and woman the other. It is based on this myth that gender inequalities are continued in society where the woman is inferior other.

The major insight of Simone De Beauvoir was that there is no 'essence' of a woman, but she is constructed as such by men and society. As Virginia wolf believed in *A Room of One's Own* that the best artists were always a combination of the man and the woman, or 'man-womanly' and 'woman-manly' (103). As she states it:

'One is not born a woman but becomes one' (1984: 267)

The main thesis of Simone De Beauvoir is that biological sex and social gender are not accidental but patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain this inequality between both of them.

Patriarchy maintains that women are unequal to men, an argument that naturalizes inequality as a pre-ordained condition of biology itself. De Beauvoir argues that sexual differences are real and unalterable and it cannot be the grounds for inequality and injustice. De Beauvoir proposed that women must take charge of their own choice. They must be subjects in their own rights instead of being the negative, inferior other. Patriarchy need not to be imposed the roles and identities on them. As a true existentialist De Beauvoir was arguing a case for women being responsible for themselves, a process that might require some socialization among women.

Thus two key ideas are offered by De Beauvoir:

- (1) The social construction of gender where women accept their roles as women and men-oriented and
- (2) The necessity for women to take responsibility and choose for themselves. When women choose for themselves they choose for the whole society.

Thus a woman's choice becomes social transformation. Through her influence a second-wave of feminism was launched by the American feminist Betty Freidan to shift the focus from a biological substrate to the man/woman debate. Gender is located as a social category rather than a biological one suggesting that women are socially conditioned trained and presented so as assume the role of 'women'. Thus we can say that De Beauvoir was one of the first feminists to turn to a social constructionist argument of gender where social conditioning, contexts and structures create major roles based on the biological differences but roles that are seen as 'natural' and timeless.

Feminists argue that an important mechanism is constituted by literary texts in which unequal power relations in society are naturalized. By taking recourse to stereotypes of the virtuous woman, the sacrificing and seductress mother, literary texts ensure that these roles become acceptable for the girl children to acquire when they grow up. In the socialization of girls and the naturalization of the power structures, literary cultures play an important role because women consent to accept these roles. Feminist critics argued that women authors have been excluded from the literary canon, a canon that circulated stereotypes of women that then naturalize their gender roles. As Virginia Woolf proposed that women authors are forced to use male language because they have not their language. Feminist theory tries to locate the basis for the woman as subject of her own self, desire and identity rather than as object for the male. Subjectivity has been variously located by feminists in the body, collectivity and the social.

Black feminism emerged from a convincing argument that is the black woman's oppression was the consequences of a double blind-one of being woman and being black. Black feminism was opposed to both patriarchy as well as white feminism. As Bell hooks puts that: "Black feminists found that sisterhood for most white women didn't mean surrendering allegiance to class race and sexual preference, we witnessed the appropriation of feminist ideology by elitist, racist white women." (188-189)

Works Cited:

- Beauvoie, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973. Print.
- Fuller, Margaret. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Greeley & McElrath publisher, 1845. Print.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977. Print.
- Wollstonecraft's, Marry. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. Courier Corporation publisher, 1792. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publisher, 1989. Print.