

# The Women Writers and Their Feminist Concerns

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## **ABSTRACT**

The works of women writers and their feminist concerns are analysed in this study. The exploration of gender roles, social inequality, and the fight for women's rights are the primary focuses of this investigation. This study intends to shed light on the crucial role that women writers have played in advancing feminist ideology and fighting patriarchal standards throughout history by conducting an analysis of the literary contributions of renowned female authors from across history. These authors, via the narratives that they have created, have not only articulated their own personal experiences, but they have also given voice to the collective hardships and aspirations of women. As a result, feminist discourse has been shaped, and societal change has been contributed to. The findings of this study highlight how crucial it is to recognise and value women writers as important agents of social reform.

**Keywords:** feminist concerns, feminism, society, writers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Through the course of history, the women writers' role in addressing feminist problems has been essential in forming the feminist movement and defying societal conventions. The purpose of this paper is to present an outline of the substantial contributions made by women writers in the advancement of feminist beliefs. The paper will focus on the authors' investigations of gender roles, social disparities, and advocacy for women's rights.

The first part of the research focuses on the early works of feminist authors like Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf, who are credited with laying the groundwork for contemporary feminist discourse. These authors conducted an insightful analysis of the constraints placed on women by society, and they argued for women to be granted equal rights and opportunities. Their works sparked conversations about a variety of topics, including women's education, economic autonomy, and the subjugation of women within the context of the home sphere.

Moving on, the next section of the article investigates the development of feminism in the 20th century, during which time authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Audre Lorde posed challenges to the profoundly entrenched patriarchal systems. These authors discussed topics such as reproductive rights, gender inequality in the workplace, and the intersectionality of oppression, with a focus on the necessity of solidarity among women hailing from a variety of different backgrounds.

In addition to this, the research investigates the contributions made by modern women writers who are still contributing to the formation of feminist discourse. In their writings, authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Roxane Gay, and Margaret Atwood have investigated topics pertaining to sexuality, reproductive rights, and institutional misogyny. In doing so, they have brought attention to the current problems that women all over the world are facing. These authors make use of their platforms to push the feminist agenda by engaging readers in conversations about gender, power, and social justice.

The key argument of this study is that female authors have not only given voice to their own experiences, but have also shed light on the experiences that women as a whole have shared. This argument is developed throughout the paper. They have been instrumental in the process of societal transformation by questioning established gender roles, criticising the expectations of society, and fighting for equal treatment of men and women. Their contributions to the world of literature have broadened the scope of feminist ideas, and they continue to encourage and enable women to challenge and overcome unjust social structures.

## **LITERARY CONCERNS WITH A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

The analysis of literary works has been revolutionised as a result of feminist literary criticism, which involves reading cultural artefacts from a feminist point of view. When applied to the field of literature, feminist critique evaluates a piece of writing by either a female or a male author in terms of both its literary merit and the way in which it portrays the female

protagonists or other female characters. Throughout the course of history, women have been the focus of an infinite number of different reconfigurations, and with each reinscription comes the requirement to perform a new round of reading. Within the confines of the text, a woman is able to be both maligned and defended, and it is within these confines that the most compelling options for picturing the future of the female subject may be found. It is possible, with the assistance of feminist literary criticism, to reevaluate established literary canons in light of the patriarchal ideologies, political views, and value systems that they perpetuate. These patriarchal ideologies, beliefs, and value systems most frequently belong to European, White men. It has simultaneously also influenced the concomitant aspects of publication and critical reception, with a special focus on the investigation of how the literary approaches utilised by women writers are distinct from the prescriptions of the male canon. Over the course of the past several years, there has been a proliferation of feminist theory, which has resulted in new advancements in the subject of women's writing.

It is necessary to trace the origins of the first feminist discourse back to the eighteenth century, when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a work for which she was criticised by a large number of her contemporaries in the writing community. The book was one of the world's first continuous feminist arguments, and it challenged many of the conventional concepts of femininity that were prevalent during her time. It was inspired by the ideals of equality and liberty that were emblemized by the French Revolution. Because Wollstonecraft placed such an emphasis on female education, particularly the kind that inculcates natural qualities as opposed to manufactured graces, she is considered to be one of the early advocates of gender equality. On the other hand, in contrast to contemporary feminists, she did not strive to liberate women from the confines of the home. Margaret Fuller's work in the United States was similar to that of Mary Wollstonecraft's in that she, too, pushed for the importance of girls and women receiving an education. In contrast to Wollstonecraft, she did not believe in the existence of predetermined gender roles and instead advocated for equality between African-American women and other women. Virginia Woolf is another pioneering figure in the development of feminism as it is known today. Her ideas continue to have an impact on feminist theorists working in the modern era. She was an early proponent of the idea of the 'androgynous' creative mind (Fuller had also written about androgyny, but her notion of it was steeped in mysticism, whereas Woolf's was anchored in biology). Woolf had the belief that the most successful artists usually possessed a combination of male and feminine characteristics, which she referred to as "man-womanly" and "woman-manly". She was also the first theorist to argue in behalf of a reading practise that was woman-centric. This type of reading practise would enable women to read as women without having to apply patriarchal yardsticks of aesthetics and values. She was the first theorist to do this.

## **HISTORY OF FEMINISM: AN OVERVIEW**

The writings of Wollstonecraft, followed by those of Fuller and Woolf, are traditionally considered to constitute the beginning of the history of feminism. This history is typically broken down into three waves. The first wave of feminism, which began in the 1830s and continued into the 1920s, was defined by the suffragette movement, which was focused on obtaining equality for women in Western societies. In addition, the women activists of the time period voiced their concerns over matters such as the protection of property rights and the elimination of chattel marriage. Evangelical feminism was an important strain of first-wave feminism that tried to improve people who were regarded to be morally 'fallen.' Evangelical feminism was one of the key strands. *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *The Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen are three examples of significant feminist works of literature that were created during the first wave of the feminist movement. These works all deal with the limited and repressive roles that women were expected to play in Victorian society.

The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 is generally regarded as the year that marked the beginning of the second wave of feminism. The maxim of this movement was that "the personal is the political," which meant that the challenges that women faced on the personal front were, in reality, political and structural in nature. This was the motto that guided this movement. Authors such as Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Angela Carter, and Muriel Spark emerged on the literary scene during this time period and rendered in great detail the private and social lives of women. In their paintings, they portrayed women who had achieved independence and were able to carve out their own space, both in their personal and professional life. The 1990s marked the beginning of what is known as third-wave feminism, which persists to this day. This movement's origins may be traced back to the writings of thinkers like Luce Irigaray, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Judith Butler, among others. The third wave of feminism is largely influenced by a post-structuralist perspective of both gender and sexuality. In addition, it criticises what it considers to be the shortcomings of the previous era of feminism. It was no longer possible to think of gender as a fixed or unchanging category; rather, it became a dynamic, contingent, negotiable, and fluid phenomenon.

The study of feminism incorporated a wide range of analytical categories, including class, caste, race, and ethnicity, amongst others. Third-wave feminism responds to the disintegration of the category of 'women' by putting more of an emphasis on the unique narratives of many women rather than the canonical narratives of middle-class, White women. This represents a fundamental shift in the way that feminist criticism is practised. Authors including Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Joyce Carol Oates, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Zadie Smith rose to prominence during the third wave of women authors. In more contemporary literature by women, attempts have been made to theorise the act of narrating as well. The question of whose voice is being used to narrate a story, whose voice is being given attention to, who is in a position of authority over a narrative, who represents himself or herself, and who is represented by another person have all become crucial points of entry into works of literature. In a similar vein, academics who study feminism have made it a point to ensure that one of their primary concerns is how they situate themselves in relation to the population that they are investigating.

However, a large number of critics in the twenty-first century have aimed their criticism against the stress on individuality that was placed by post-feminists. These critics have stated that if the personal is genuinely the political, then a concentration just on the individual is ineffective in combating what is actually a group initiative. According to the opinions of these detractors, the advancement of the feminist movement is hampered by an excessive focus on differences. As a result of their emphasis on difference, feminists suffer the additional risk of concentrating their attention on particular differences (such as race or caste) to the exclusion of others (such as workplace).

### **WOMEN'S WRITING: TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT**

As a social constructionist perspective of gender began to take shape, the seeds of which were sowed in the first wave, and sex and gender were distinguished from one another, feminists began to look at and identify the psychological, socio-cultural, and political ramifications of gender norms. This was done in conjunction with a social constructionist view of gender, which had its roots in the first wave. Gerda Lerner expresses it best when she encapsulates this idea when she states, "Women writers, as women, negotiate with divided loyalties and doubled consciousnesses, both within and without a social and cultural agreement". The inclination to see certain behaviour and activities as being typical of a particular gender led in women authors being put in a double bind. They were expected to limit their writings to those areas in which they had initially gained experience. This prevented them from exploring a wider range of topics. As a social constructionist perspective of gender began to take shape, the seeds of which were sowed in the first wave, and sex and gender were distinguished from one another, feminists began to look at and identify the psychological, socio-cultural, and political ramifications of gender norms. This was done in conjunction with a social constructionist view of gender, which had its roots in the first wave.

Gerda Lerner expresses it best when she encapsulates this idea when she states, "Women writers, as women, negotiate with divided loyalties and doubled consciousnesses, both within and without a social and cultural agreement". They were expected to limit their writings to those areas of which they had first-hand experience (i.e. the domestic sphere), but in a rather clever distortion of reason, when they would stick to conventionally 'feminine' topics, they were accused of being self-serving and parochial. This tendency to look at certain behaviours and actions as being typical of a particular gender resulted in women writers being in a double bind. According to the renowned author Margaret Atwood, "when a man writes about things like doing the dishes, it's realism; when a woman does, it's an unfortunate feminine genetic limitation".

In other words, when a man writes about mundane tasks like doing the dishes, it's realistic. In the eyes of their contemporaries from the eighteenth century, female authors were first and foremost women. If a woman writer wanted to be judged exclusively for the distinctiveness of her writing and not for writing well only when compared to the other women writers of her time, she frequently had no choice but to publish under a male pseudonym. This was the only way to ensure that she would be taken seriously. Women authors have always had to deal with the constant stress of knowing that their creative talent will be overlooked because of the numerous prejudices that are associated to their gender. This has been a problem for as long as there have been women writers. These connotations needed to be debunked, and women writers had a significant part to play in doing so. In point of fact, throughout the course of the past few decades, there has been a significant proliferation of women's writing as a unique literary culture. This movement has resulted in the establishment of an entire canon of literary studies that are devoted solely to the examination of women's writing.

However, there are some critics who are against the use of the phrase "women's writing." These critics argue that the term gives an author's gender more importance than her literary productions, practically giving the impression that the privilege is a form of restitution for the wrongs that women have experienced. Despite this, women writers have been able to challenge not just the established hierarchies of power and dominance, but also the preconceived views of what constitutes

literature. This is despite the fact that women writers have historically been relegated to the background by men. Their use of atypical literary modes, narrative strategies, diction, and style led to the establishment of a separate genre known as 'women's writing,' which holds a special place when compared to the writings of males. Because of this, the written word eventually developed into a tool for empowering women. The need to express and value women's own perspectives on both themselves and the world around them is a topic that frequently appears in women's writing and is one of the genre's most prominent motifs. Over the course of history, women's writing has boldly moved forward in the direction of an investigation of a woman's identity. They have been slowly moving towards a literature that is anchored within the 'inner space,' and 'a room of one's own' was a significant symbol of the same in the women writers' denial of a masculine literary heritage. This was done in an effort to challenge a masculine literary tradition.

### **WOMEN'S WRITING: LOCATING THE GENRE**

If we examine the major writers of nineteenth century, We can see that a large number of women writers, like Mary Shelley, Charlotte Bront, George Eliot, Kate Chopin, Elizabeth Gaskell, Emily Bront, and Maria Edgeworth, amongst others, have produced works that were pioneering for the time period in which they were published. These works have, over the course of the past few decades, been regarded as having foreshadowed the concerns and concerns of contemporary feminist investigation. Even more groundbreaking were the writings of American authors writing about the same period, such as Winifred Holtby, Rebecca Harding Davis, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Louisa May Allcot. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their important study on women novelists of the nineteenth century, state that the major thematic preoccupation of the nineteenth century was "the woman's quest for self-definition". This was stated in the authors' seminal study. At the turn of the twentieth century, women writers who authored novels and other forms of prose began experimenting with different storytelling strategies and styles, as well as adopting new approaches to writing literature. Disjointed, non-linear narratives that were distinguished by analepsis and prolepsis directly addressed those subjects that were previously thrown under the carpet, such as women's sexual urges, sexual violence, same-sex desire, and the woman's psyche. These narratives were characterised by analepsis and prolepsis. Writers started investigating how unfulfilling the traditional roles of a daughter, wife, and mother may be, as well as how romantic engagements and marriage can't be a woman's only desire. This led to a shift in perspective on how women view their responsibilities in society. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asserts that contemporary female writers have been "especially interested in the woman alone." "The lovers and husbands of their heroines clearly play a secondary role. This is not done in the trivialised manner of narcissistic fantasies or as a result of underdeveloped characters (on the contrary, these men are finely delineated), but rather as particular figures among many in the difficult lives of struggling women".

Women poets of the time, like their prosodic counterparts, also embraced a new literary mode, charging their works with distinctive stylistic and structural qualities, and using the poem's physical structure as a method to challenge the old literary forms. This was done in the same manner. Poets in England such as Carol Rumens and Anna Wickham, as well as poets in the United States such as Marianne Moore and Hilda Doolittle, have presented a genuine challenge to the literary conventions of the mainstream. Even yet, they were walking on thin ice in this regard since, in addition to writing in a manner that was as distinct as it was possible for them, they also had to be careful to avoid being "personal" rather than universal because they needed to rely on mainstream literary circles in order to get published and be held in high regard. However, as time went on, women writers who were able to support themselves financially established their own printing presses, journals, and magazines. The 20th century was also marked by a significant increase in the production of African-American literature. The works of African-American authors were characterised by a different set of issues than those of White authors writing during the same time period.

Authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Zora Neale Hurston produced works that centred on topics such as racial injustice, rigorous standards of beauty, desire, motherhood, interpersonal relationships, misogyny, gender roles, violence, incest, community and society, and God. These authors are known for their contributions to the literary canon. These pillars of Black women's literature served as models for a whole new generation of aspiring Black female novelists, including Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor. Black feminism advocated that the critical category of race be incorporated into feminist arguments, and this was a central tenet of the movement. Those who were considered to be the foremothers of black feminist thinking include names like Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense Spillers, and Hazel Carby. Postcolonial feminism, which emerged not long after, was a step forward and extended the concerns of Black feminists to the challenges encountered by Chicano and Asian American women as well as women of other cultures and nations. This was accomplished by taking a step forward and expanding the concerns of Black feminists.

Perspectives on Women's Studies and Feminist Theory Since the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a proliferation of critical works that analyse the writings of women in light of the expanding body of feminist thinking. This trend can be traced back

to the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, French feminism, which developed during the 1970s with the works of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, has conducted an in-depth investigation into the concept of female subjectivity. Cixous, drawing on psychoanalysis, opposed the inclination towards 'phallogocentrism' in literature and instead claimed that the only way forward was to destroy the hierarchies of language common in an androcentric society. She did this by arguing that the only way forward was to topple the hierarchies of language. Instead of conceptualising men and women as A and A, she conceived of them as A and B, or as independent creatures. Women would cease to be regarded as the 'other' in relation to men.

In a similar vein, Kristeva proposed that because women were unable to become an active part of the 'symbolic order,' their writings expressed themselves in the form of poetic language. She referred to these forms of writing as 'genotexts,' as she believed that they sidestepped the conventions of language. In the 1980s, one of the most important breakthroughs in feminist philosophy was the recognition that language, when used for the sake of patriarchy, functions as a tool of oppression. Many feminists believe that language possesses a power that enables it to control social interactions in ways that we are not privy to, hence hiding patriarchal ideals in deceptive jargon. This power has been attributed to language's ability to regulate social connections in ways that we are not aware of. In her book "Man Made Language," Dale Spender spent some time meditating on the fact that, in contrast to the declarative and authoritative style in which males write, the tone of women's writing is nearly invariably submissive and apologetic. Since then, many feminists have argued that language possesses a power that enables it to regulate social interactions in ways that we are not aware of. They credit language with having this power. Spender then goes on to underline how the connotations of male versions of words tend to be more positive when compared to the connotations of their feminine counterparts. To emphasise this point, she uses the example of the word pair "master" and "mistress" to illustrate her point.

Due to the fact that language will always be slanted in favour of men, it became evident that the mission women authors needed to accomplish was to produce a language that was "their own." Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Fay Weldon, and Kathy Acker, amongst other writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century, mirror what Helene Cixous characterised as the "écriture feminine" in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Their writings reflect a feminine consciousness, which results in the creation of styles, themes, diction, and tropes that are fundamentally different from those used by male writers. Mystical language, puns, wordplay, and even aesthetic modifications like hyphens and brackets became commonplace as a result of this trend. Their personalities were more difficult to pin down because of their fluidity. Jeanette Winterson, for example, crafted characters with a certain gender flexibility; Angela Carter tried to undermine patriarchy through the use of magical realism and by depicting absent father figures and focusing on mother-daughter ties in her writing. Both of these strategies centred on mother-daughter interactions. In point of fact, the gender-queer theories of the twenty-first century owe a debt of gratitude to these authors and critics, whose works placed a focus on the flexibility of gender identities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women's writing across the world and in India has, since the beginning; another pattern that has been observed is literature that is autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. This pattern became more popular in the second half of the 20th century, when 'authentic realist' feminist reading practises emphasised the significance of learning about the experiences of other women through literature as a means of contributing to readers' comprehension of their own lives. Women readers were able to better make sense of their own lives through these kinds of intellectual connections with the lives of other women. By focusing on women in their capacity as readers of literary works, we are able to investigate the ways in which they deploy these works to contest the narratives that are imposed on them by society. Therefore, feminist theories are concerned not just with women in the roles of authors or producers of texts, but also in the roles of readers and consumers of those writings. The autobiographical writings of women in India, similar to their Western counterparts, have been receiving an increasing amount of critical and scholarly attention in recent years.

The concept of feminism in our modern times is expansive and multifaceted in both the academic and political realms. It is adamant that it be change-oriented rather than merely a theoretical framework devoid of any real-world applicability. They argue against the establishment of a separate academic discipline and instead focus on the topic's integration with other areas of knowledge. In order to accomplish this, the incorporation of feminist principles into the research community is regarded as an essential strategic move. The end goal is to provide a setting in which the pervasive disparity that exists in the society may be unearthed and explored, as well as opportunities to discuss potential solutions to the problem. Therefore, the majority of critical studies have attempted to interact with the 'materiality' of texts, which refers to the non-fictional components of the works or the works' foundation in reality.

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