



Writing Women, Reading Power: Gender and Feminism in English Literature

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Abstract

Feminist literary criticism is among the most intellectually productive and politically consequential critical movements in the history of English literary studies. Beginning from the foundational insight that literature is not a gender-neutral field but one in which the representation, silencing, and distortion of women's experience has been historically systematic, feminist criticism has transformed both what we read and how we read it, recovering neglected women writers, exposing the ideological workings of canonical texts, and developing theoretical frameworks capable of illuminating the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, and colonial power. This theoretical and literature review offers an accessible introduction for undergraduate students to the major waves, theoretical frameworks, and landmark texts of feminist literary criticism. Drawing on the foundational contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Elaine Showalter, and examining literary works by Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Zora Neale Hurston, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Roxane Gay, the review traces the development of feminist literary thought from its earliest articulations to its contemporary engagements with intersectionality, queer theory, and postcolonial feminism. The paper argues that feminist literary criticism is not a specialized subfield of English studies but a fundamental reorientation of the discipline that affects how every text in the tradition must be read.

Keywords:- Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender, Patriarchy, Gynocriticism, Intersectionality, The Male Gaze, Women's Writing, Woolf, Millett, Gilbert and Gubar, Butler, Hooks, Morrison, Adichie, Queer Theory, Postcolonial Feminism.

Introduction

In 1929, Virginia Woolf delivered a series of lectures at Newnham and Girton Colleges, Cambridge, that would be published as *A Room of One's Own*, one of the most influential works in the history of feminist thought. Woolf's central argument was elegantly simple and devastatingly effective: a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction (Woolf 4). Behind this apparently modest claim lay a far more radical analysis: that the conditions of literary production are not gender-neutral, that the economic dependence, social restriction, and domestic confinement that have historically characterized women's lives are not incidental obstacles to literary achievement but structural features of a patriarchal order

that systematically excludes women from the cultural authority to speak, to imagine, and to be heard.

Woolf's essay did not inaugurate feminist literary criticism, which has roots extending back to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and beyond, but it articulated with extraordinary clarity and literary grace the questions that would animate the field for the century that followed. Why have women been so largely absent from the literary canon? What happens to women's creative capacity when it is systematically denied expression? How do the texts of the literary tradition represent women, and whose interests are served by those representations? And what would a literary culture look like that took women's experience seriously as both subject matter and creative vantage point? These questions remain as urgent today as they were in 1929, though the theoretical frameworks available for addressing them have become considerably richer and more complex (Gilbert and Gubar 3; Showalter 12).

This review is written for undergraduate students encountering feminist literary criticism for the first time, and aims to provide a coherent account of the field's historical development, its major theoretical frameworks, and the literary texts in which its insights are most powerfully illustrated. The review is organized around five major sections: the historical foundations of feminist literary criticism; the first and second waves of feminist criticism and their landmark texts; the theory of gender performativity and its literary implications; intersectionality and the challenge of difference; and contemporary feminist literary culture and its debates. Each section moves between theoretical exposition and literary illustration, modelling the kind of politically engaged close reading that feminist criticism demands.

Historical Foundations of Feminist Literary Criticism

Wollstonecraft and the First Articulations

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is widely regarded as the founding document of Anglo-American feminist thought. Written in response to Enlightenment political theory, and specifically to Edmund Burke's conservative romanticism and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's relegation of women to a purely domestic sphere, Wollstonecraft argued that women were not naturally inferior to men in intellect or moral capacity but had been rendered so by an educational system designed to produce ornamental, emotionally manipulative, and intellectually dependent creatures suited to the subordinate roles that patriarchal society required of them (Wollstonecraft 18). Her analysis of the literature of her period, particularly its conduct books and sentimental novels, as instruments of women's subjection anticipated by nearly two centuries the feminist literary criticism that would develop these insights systematically.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) represents the second major foundational moment in the intellectual tradition that feminist literary criticism would draw upon. De Beauvoir's central insight, that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, established the crucial distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender that would underpin all subsequent feminist theory (de Beauvoir 267). For literary criticism, this distinction is of fundamental importance: if femininity is a social construction rather than a natural fact, then its representation in literary texts can be analyzed as ideology rather than accepted as truth, and the literary canon itself can be scrutinized for its role in producing and reproducing the representations of femininity through which women's subjection has been naturalized and maintained.

Woolf and the Tradition of Women's Writing

Between *A Vindication* and the emergence of feminist literary criticism as an academic

discipline in the 1970s, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (1938) represent the most significant contributions to a tradition of feminist literary and cultural analysis in English. Woolf's method in *A Room of One's Own* is itself a model of feminist critical practice: moving between historical analysis, literary close reading, and imaginative speculation, she constructs the figure of Shakespeare's hypothetical sister, a woman of equal genius to the playwright who, denied education, economic independence, and social freedom, would have found no outlet for her gifts and no audience for her voice, and would have died obscure (Woolf 46).

This image crystallizes one of feminist criticism's most important contributions: the recovery and revaluation of women writers who have been excluded from or marginalized within the literary canon. The history of English literature as it was taught throughout much of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly a history of male writers, a selection that presented itself as natural and inevitable, the product of simple merit, but that feminist criticism revealed as the product of deliberate acts of exclusion, neglect, and devaluation (Gilbert and Gubar 3; Showalter 7). The recovery of writers such as Aphra Behn, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen, to name only a few, has transformed our understanding of the English literary tradition and demonstrated that women's absence from the canonical record was a consequence of institutional exclusion, not a lack of literary achievement.

First and Second Wave Feminist Criticism and Its Landmark Texts

Millett and the Politics of Sexual Politics

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) is the text most commonly identified as the founding document of academic feminist literary criticism. Millett's central argument was that relations between the sexes are political relations, structured by power rather than by nature or consent, and that literature is one of the primary sites through which patriarchal ideology, the systematic privileging of the masculine over the feminine, is produced, circulated, and naturalized. Millett demonstrated this argument through close readings of the work of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, showing how these celebrated male writers used their representations of sexuality to reinforce male dominance and female subjection, and doing so with a polemical energy and critical precision that transformed the field virtually overnight (Millett 23).

Millett's method, the ideological analysis of literary representations of gender and sexuality, established the fundamental approach of what Elaine Showalter would call feminist critique: the analysis of women as readers of texts produced predominantly by men, attending to the ways in which literary representations of women reflect and reinforce the power structures of the cultures that produced them. This approach has been applied productively to an enormous range of canonical texts, from the objectification and idealization of women in the Petrarchan sonnet tradition to the representation of feminine madness in Victorian fiction to the eroticization of female suffering in much Romantic poetry (Showalter 12; Moi 4).

Gilbert and Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic*

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is the most influential work of second-wave feminist literary criticism and one of the founding texts of the field of gynocriticism, Showalter's term for the study of women as writers and of the distinctive literary traditions they have produced. Gilbert and Gubar's study examined the work of nineteenth-century women writers including Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Mary Shelley, and George Eliot, arguing that these writers produced their fiction under conditions of profound social and psychological constraint, and that the formal and thematic features of their

work, including its characteristic patterns of illness, confinement, female rage expressed through monstrous or mad characters, and strategies of narrative indirection, reflect the experience of writing in a culture that denied women literary authority (Gilbert and Gubar 77).

The book's title derives from its central interpretive figure: the madwoman Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha not merely as a plot device or an instance of Victorian racial ideology (though she is both of these things) but as Jane's dark double, the embodiment of the rage and desire that the novel's heroine must suppress or displace in order to survive in a patriarchal world. This reading, which treats apparently marginal or subordinate female characters as repositories of the psychic energies that the dominant narrative cannot accommodate, became one of the most productive methodological innovations of feminist criticism, generating a vast body of subsequent scholarship on the doubleness and indirection that characterize much women's writing (Gilbert and Gubar 359).

Austen and the Politics of Domestic Fiction

Jane Austen's novels present feminist criticism with one of its most fascinating and contested objects of study. On one reading, Austen's fiction, confined to the drawing rooms and country houses of the English gentry and concluded in virtually every case with the heroine's marriage, appears to endorse the patriarchal social order rather than to challenge it. On another, more attentive reading, Austen's irony is a sustained critique of that order from within: her heroines' intelligence, moral seriousness, and capacity for independent judgment are consistently superior to those of the men who exercise authority over their lives, and the novels repeatedly expose the economic desperation that underlies the social comedy of courtship and marriage (Wollstonecraft 24; Gilbert and Gubar 109).

Pride and Prejudice (1813) is the richest testing ground for this debate. Elizabeth Bennet's wit, independence, and refusal of the first, economically advantageous proposal from Mr Collins make her one of the most appealing feminist heroines in the English literary tradition; yet the novel ends with her marriage to Darcy, and the resolution depends on his reformation and her recognition of his worth, a structure that positions female fulfillment as contingent on male approval. Feminist critics have interpreted this ending variously: as a genuine limitation of Austen's vision, as an ideologically necessary compromise that the social conditions of Austen's time made unavoidable, and as itself an ironic commentary on the impossibility of female independence in a society where women's economic survival depends on securing a good marriage (Moi 7; Showalter 31).

Gender Performativity and Its Literary Implications

Butler and the Critique of Gender Essentialism

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) introduced to feminist theory a concept that would prove as transformative as de Beauvoir's nature/nurture distinction had been four decades earlier: the idea that gender is not a stable identity or natural fact but a performance, constituted through the repeated citation and reiteration of culturally intelligible acts. Butler argued that there is no original or natural gender behind its performance, no feminine essence that precedes and grounds the acts and gestures through which femininity is expressed; rather, gender is itself produced by those acts, and the illusion of a prior, essential gender identity is an effect of the performance, not its cause (Butler 33).

For literary criticism, Butler's concept of gender performativity has several important implications. First, it directs attention to the textual and discursive processes through which gender identities are constructed in literary representations, rather than treating those representations as reflections of a pre-given gender reality. Second, it opens up the possibility

of reading literary texts as sites of gender trouble, performances of gender that reveal its constructed and potentially subvertible character. Third, it provides a framework for analyzing texts that thematize cross-dressing, gender inversion, and the instability of sexual identity, from Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) to contemporary fiction exploring trans and non-binary identities (Butler 137; Moi 21).

Woolf's *Orlando* and the Performance of Gender

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) can be read as a literary anticipation of Butler's theoretical insights, though it was written more than sixty years before *Gender Trouble*. The novel follows its protagonist across four centuries of English history, beginning as a young man at the court of Elizabeth I and emerging, after a mysterious sleep in Constantinople, as a woman who continues to live through the centuries to the present day of the novel's composition. Woolf uses this fantastic premise to explore the social construction of gender with extraordinary wit and precision: when Orlando becomes a woman, nothing in her essential self or personality changes, but the social world treats her entirely differently, restricting her freedom, limiting her access to property, and requiring her to adopt the costumes, postures, and affectations of femininity (Woolf 97).

The novel's treatment of clothing as the primary marker of gender is particularly resonant in the context of Butler's performativity theory. Orlando moves freely between male and female dress throughout the novel, and Woolf's narrator observes with characteristic irony that it was the clothes that wore her and not she the clothes, suggesting that the surface performance of gender produces rather than expresses the gendered self (Woolf 132). For undergraduate students encountering both Butler's theory and Woolf's fiction, *Orlando* provides an exceptionally vivid and entertaining literary illustration of the argument that gender is a performance without an original.

Intersectionality and the Challenge of Difference

Bell Hooks and the Critique of White Feminism

One of the most important interventions in the history of feminist literary criticism has been the challenge mounted by Black feminists, feminists of color, and postcolonial feminists to the implicit whiteness and class privilege of much mainstream second-wave feminism. Bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) argued that the feminist movement had systematically marginalized the experience of Black women, both by treating gender as the primary axis of oppression in ways that erased the simultaneous operations of racism and class exploitation, and by focusing its attention and energy on the concerns of middle-class white women to the exclusion of those whose experience was shaped by the intersection of multiple forms of structural disadvantage (hooks 15).

Hooks's intervention, and the broader intellectual movement it represented, had profound implications for feminist literary criticism. If the category of woman was not a stable, unified ground of feminist analysis but was itself internally differentiated by race, class, sexuality, and colonial history, then a feminist criticism premised on the universality of female experience was not merely theoretically inadequate but politically complicit in the exclusions it reproduced. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to describe the way in which different systems of oppression interact to produce experiences that cannot be adequately understood by analyzing any single axis in isolation, provided feminist literary criticism with the conceptual tools to address this complexity (Crenshaw 139).

Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is the text around which the project of recovering Black women's literary tradition has most powerfully crystallized.

Originally dismissed or ignored by the male-dominated Harlem Renaissance literary establishment of its day, the novel was rescued from obscurity largely through the efforts of Alice Walker, who in 1975 published an essay calling Hurston a genius of the South and urging readers to seek out her work. The novel's celebration of Janie Crawford's journey toward self-knowledge, sexual awakening, and the discovery of her own voice against the backdrop of African American Southern community life in the early twentieth century has made it one of the central texts of both African American and feminist literary traditions (Walker 83; Gates 7).

Hurston's narrative method is itself a significant dimension of the novel's feminist achievement. Her use of Black vernacular speech in both dialogue and narration, her refusal of the assimilationist impulse to render African American experience in the idioms of white literary culture, and her celebration of the oral storytelling traditions of African American community life constitute a formal claim for the literary value of a cultural inheritance that white literary culture had systematically devalued. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. has argued, Hurston's signifying use of Black vernacular is not a naive or unreflective deployment of folk material but a sophisticated literary strategy that engages critically with both the white literary tradition and the more assimilationist strands of African American letters (Gates 9).

Toni Morrison and the Black Female Literary Imagination

Toni Morrison is the most significant African American novelist of the twentieth century and one of the central figures in the intersectional feminist literary canon. Her Nobel Prize-winning body of work, which includes *Beloved* (1987), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *The Bluest Eye* (1970), engages consistently and with extraordinary literary power with the intersection of race, gender, and the legacy of slavery in shaping African American experience and identity. *Beloved*, widely considered her masterpiece, draws on the historical case of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her own child rather than see her returned to slavery, to explore the psychic and spiritual devastation that slavery wrought on Black women's sense of self, motherhood, and bodily autonomy (Morrison 16; Holloway 4).

Morrison's critical writings, collected in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), are as important as her fiction for feminist literary criticism. In these essays, Morrison examines the ways in which African American experience and the figure of the Black person have functioned in the white American literary imagination, arguing that Americanness has been defined against and through the presence of African Americans in ways that the dominant critical tradition has systematically refused to acknowledge. Her analysis extends the feminist critical project of exposing the ideological operations of literary representation to the intersection of race and nation, making an indispensable contribution to the intersectional feminist literary tradition (Morrison 5).

Contemporary Feminist Literary Culture and Its Debates

Adichie and the Fourth Wave

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has emerged as one of the most significant and widely read feminist voices of the twenty-first century, combining the literary achievement of major novels with the public intellectual work of essays and lectures that have reached audiences far beyond the academy. Her essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), originally delivered as a TED Talk and subsequently published as a short book, provides one of the clearest, most accessible, and most persuasive articulations of feminist principles available in the contemporary cultural landscape, and has been adopted by several national governments as a contribution to gender equality education (Adichie 11).

Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013) is a richly intersectional feminist text that explores the experience of a Nigerian woman navigating the intersecting structures of race, gender, and

national identity in the United States and Britain. The novel's protagonist, Ifemelu, maintains a blog about race in America that functions as an internal meta-commentary on the novel's own concerns, analyzing with sharp wit and sociological precision the ways in which race and gender intersect in American culture in ways that Ifemelu, as a Black African woman, is positioned to see with particular clarity. Adichie's formal choice to embed this commentary within the novel is itself a feminist strategy: it refuses the separation of personal experience and political analysis, insisting that the personal is political in precisely the way that second-wave feminism had argued (Adichie 7; Millett 24).

Roxane Gay and Bad Feminism

Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014) represents a different but complementary strand of contemporary feminist literary and cultural criticism, one that has been particularly influential in shaping the public feminist conversation of the twenty-first century. Gay's essays, which range from literary criticism to cultural commentary to personal memoir, are united by a commitment to the kind of honest, self-questioning feminist practice that refuses ideological purity in favor of engagement with the messiness, contradiction, and ambivalence of actual feminist experience. Gay describes herself as a bad feminist because she enjoys cultural products, including music, films, and books, whose attitudes toward women she finds troubling, and she insists that this kind of ambivalence is not a betrayal of feminist principles but an honest acknowledgment of the complexity of living in a culture saturated by patriarchal values (Gay 11).

Gay's criticism of literary texts, including her essays on *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *The Hunger Games*, and the fiction of Edwidge Danticat, models a form of feminist literary analysis that is attentive to both the pleasures and the politics of popular cultural forms, and that takes seriously the experiences of readers who find value in texts that do not conform to feminist ideals. This approach reflects a broader shift in feminist criticism toward what might be called an ethics of complexity: a recognition that feminist reading must engage with the full range of literary and cultural production, including its contradictions, rather than confining itself to the celebration of exemplary feminist texts (Gay 4).

Sylvia Plath and the Confessional Tradition

No account of gender and feminism in English literature would be complete without Sylvia Plath, whose poetry and fiction have occupied a central and intensely debated place in the feminist literary canon since the publication of *The Bell Jar* (1963) and the posthumous *Ariel* (1965). Plath's writing engages with the experience of being a woman in mid-twentieth century America with an intensity and formal precision that has made it both deeply influential and deeply controversial. *The Bell Jar*'s semi-autobiographical account of Esther Greenwood's mental breakdown and attempted suicide in the context of the crushing social expectations placed on young women in 1950s America remains one of the most searing literary analyses of the psychological costs of enforced femininity in the English literary tradition (Plath 2; Wagner-Martin 8).

Plath's poetry, and above all the late poems collected in *Ariel*, push the confessional mode to its extreme, producing works of extraordinary lyric intensity that use domestic and bodily imagery to explore experiences of rage, grief, loss, and the complex relationship between female creativity and self-destruction. The poem *Daddy*, with its sustained metaphor comparing the speaker's relationship with her dead father to that of a Jew with a Nazi, has been among the most debated poems in the feminist canon, generating controversy about the ethics of appropriating the imagery of the Holocaust for personal-political purposes while simultaneously demonstrating the extraordinary power of Plath's ability to render private experience through historical imagery (Plath 74; Rose 7).

Discussion: The Continuing Necessity of Feminist Criticism

The survey of feminist literary criticism undertaken in this review reveals a field of extraordinary intellectual vitality and political consequence. From Wollstonecraft's foundational insistence on women's rational capacity to Butler's deconstruction of gender essentialism, from Gilbert and Gubar's recovery of the nineteenth-century women's literary tradition to hooks's and Crenshaw's intersectional challenge to mainstream feminism's exclusions, the field has consistently renewed itself through engagement with the most urgent questions of its historical moment. What unites this diversity of approaches is a shared commitment to the proposition that literature is not a gender-neutral field and that attending to gender is not a specialized interest but a fundamental dimension of literary understanding.

For undergraduate students, the most important practical consequence of feminist literary criticism is a transformed way of reading: one that attends to who is speaking and who is silent in a text, to whose experience is centered and whose marginalized, to the ways in which representations of gender, sexuality, and the body are constructed and naturalized through literary form, and to the historical and cultural conditions that shape both the production and the reception of literary texts. This is not a way of reading that applies only to texts by or about women but a general critical orientation that enriches the reading of every text in the literary tradition, revealing dimensions of meaning that less politically attentive approaches leave invisible (Moi 21; Showalter 12).

The contemporary relevance of feminist literary criticism has been intensified rather than diminished by the cultural and political developments of the twenty-first century. The global resurgence of feminist activism associated with the #MeToo movement, debates about reproductive rights, the representation of women in political life, and the cultural reckoning with the legacies of racism and colonialism all give the questions that feminist literary criticism has long been asking a renewed urgency. Literature, as both a record of and a contribution to culture, is one of the primary sites where these questions are worked out, and feminist criticism provides the most powerful set of tools available for analyzing how it does so.

Conclusion

This review has traced the historical development, major theoretical frameworks, and key literary texts of feminist literary criticism, from Wollstonecraft's foundational challenge to patriarchal culture through Woolf's analysis of the conditions of women's creative life, second-wave criticism's political readings of the canon, Butler's theorization of gender performativity, hooks's and Crenshaw's intersectional challenge, and the contemporary feminist writing of Adichie, Gay, and their contemporaries. The picture that emerges is of a critical tradition that has consistently evolved in response to the limitations and exclusions of its own previous forms, and that has done so precisely because it has remained anchored to the political conviction that literature matters, that representations of gender in literary texts have real consequences for the lives of real women, and that the project of reading those representations critically is therefore not an academic luxury but a practical necessity.

For undergraduate students of English literature, an encounter with feminist literary criticism is not an optional supplement to a mainstream literary education but a fundamental component of it. To read English literature without the tools that feminist criticism provides is to read it with one eye closed: to miss the ideological operations of canonical texts, to remain ignorant of the women writers who have been excluded from the tradition, and to fail to understand the full complexity of the literary culture that has shaped and continues to shape our imaginative lives. The best feminist criticism does not narrow the field of literary study but enormously expands it, insisting that the full range of human experience, including the

experience of half of humanity that has been systematically excluded from or distorted in the dominant literary record, must be part of what we mean by English literature.

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