

## **The Many Faces of Feminist Literary Theory: A Conceptual Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the various dimensions of Feminist Literary Theory. It contains different definitions of the term and their varied implications. The paper explores the historical antecedents that led to the emergence of feminist literary theory from the basic concept of feminism. It also provides a succinct historical account of the growth of the theory and. From research conducted in some Nigerian Universities by this writer, factors like the difficult registers used in discussing these theories and the lengthy and bulky nature of materials are often presented by students as barriers to their comprehension and understanding of the area. This brief conceptual discourse aims to provide insight to what Feminism is, its various facets and its concerns in simple language such that it will elicit the interest of the students and readers alike. Thus the paper will also discuss the historical developments and the factors responsible for the many dimensions of feminist theory. It will further enumerate and discuss some of—these theories, their thematic preoccupations and some of their major scholars.

### **Background**

The history of discontent, despair and disillusionment regarding the oppression, suppression and domination of one segment of humanity by another is as old as human history. As such, the struggle of women folk against male patriarchy is an old phenomenon. This is not to deny the fact that, on rare occasions in history, women also had the upper hand subjecting men to tools of oppression. The stories of queens and princess do not always contain humane accounts. But the general phenomenon throughout history is that of patriarchy. Simone De Beauvoir (1949, 77) is credited with declaring "Humanity is a male" and that man is therefore, the one who absolutely and singlehandedly

defines who a woman is and not the woman herself. He does so by excluding the woman in herself but as relative to him. According to De Beauvoir, man's definition does not bestow upon her autonomy as a being... she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not vice versa; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential man. He is the subject; he is the ABSOLUTE – she is the other. (1987:16). Perhaps this is the main reason why even when referring to her, she is often merely a prefix, (wo)man, (s)he and in a plural, her identity is subsumed within the male pronoun: they, them, their.

Feminism, like all other schools of literary theories, has its roots from the historical development of literary movements. Every century, right from the Greek and Roman civilizations, to the dark ages, the middle ages and down to the renaissance period up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (which culminates the industrial revolution) to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries literary theory underwent a lot of transformation and in phases. The concept gradually developed into a philosophical or theoretical discourse that came to be identified as Feminist Theory. It seeks to discuss some concerns like gender inequality, feminine peculiarities and the exclusively woman psychological concern. The concept or theory involves women's social status, experiences, interests, the feminist politics and education in various disciplines such as literature, sociology, psychology, economics and even philosophy. The theory explores the female consciousness and the different conception of gender as it limits and oppresses the other of the two genders. The whole idea or philosophy arises from the observation that women were involved in all forms of hard labour including weight lifting. Earlier than now, women in Europe and other parts of the world were merely struggling to have their voices heard. For instance during the renaissance period up to the industrial revolution era, women were not given access to modern education. Not only that, women all through history, were regarded as mere addendum or sex products and in some periods and civilizations, they are not more than pets and properties

that could simply be inherited along with the other properties of their deceased husbands and as could be seen in the great fictional work by Thomas Hardy, one of the first 20 foremost novelist of the twentieth century, *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, she could even be auctioned!

Feminist literary theory is regarded by many scholars and critics as a component of Post structuralism. Post structuralism is an umbrella term that stands for the various deconstructive schools of criticisms and theory. With the inauguration of Derrida's seminal paper titled *Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, the major contention of structuralisms in the use of language was critiqued. Earlier than the Poststructuralists contention, structuralisms relied in the face value of the use of language. Hence, feminism's central concern in the use of language is the unfair dominance of man as the head of everything. Man represents woman in all aspects and spheres of life such as religious creeds, marriage institution, economy, politics and general social life. The voice heard in all these; including, those aspects that are exclusively feminine, like pregnancy and child birth, menstrual experiences, breastfeeding and other exclusive woman's psychological experiences are man's preserve to explain! As such they questioned the veracity of the signifier/signified relationship in language and submit that it is arbitrary.

Habib, (2011 pp105) submits that feminism traces its roots to the period of the ancient Greek civilization with Aristophanes' play titled *Lysistrata*. In the play *Lysistrata* and her women characters were able to cajole their male counterparts (Husbands) to stop a war between the two factions. They were able to succeed by denying them sexuality and other special endowment that God has exclusively bestowed them with. Apart from Aristophanes, traces of feminism were seen in Aristotle's Magnum Opus titled *Aristotle's Poesis*.

This has been the trend in the contemporary world where women questioned the use of language as in He/She, Man/Woman,

Male/Female. They view these references as subjecting women to mere constructs that seem to suggest after thought. Even in the area of religion and ideology, women asked rhetorically, questions like; why are women not given the chance to lead in the Churches and Mosques? They argue that women do share some experiences like pregnancy, labour, child breeding, menstrual pain and the likes that only they could explain. But alas, even in these areas men dictate how they should handle them. They further asked why they won't have the voice of their own.

The likes of Virginia Woolf who published *The House of One's Own*, Julia Christevers and many of them provide that historically speaking feminism and gender studies developed through history to arrive at what it is today. In the past, women writers like George Elliot had to hide under pen names to be able to get their works published!

Therefore, Feminism simply defined, "is the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men," or "a struggle to achieve this aim" (*Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* 2000-430). Most often than not, definition are misleading, restrictive or to a greater extent confusing. A better way of defining the term *Feminism* is by tracing the history of the word and its content and context in the present day.

Generally speaking, up to the first quarter of the 19th century higher education was a Church of England's monopoly: There were only two universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Only Men could attend them, the teachers must be men, and are ordained ministers who had to be unmarried so that they could leave in the college. (Barry 1995-12). The history of what constituted the body of what is known as literary theory, from practical theory to what we have today, started days back to the era of Aristotle to levis. The constituents of 'the body of theory about literature that has existed for many centuries as an available under-punning for the stuffy of literature, goes back to Greek and Latin

(1995-21). Just like what has happened to the history of literary writings in African states in the early 40's to the late 70's the 'period of the *Osadebes*, *Achebes*, *Armahs*, *Ngugis* and the *Soyinkas*. The period is conventionally termed, the period of the '*Canon of African Literature*' the term is defined by O.E.D. as a generally accepted rule, standard or principle by which something is judged' (2000-158). As we can see, from *Aristotle*, *Plato*, to the period of *Mathew Arnold*, *F.R Levis*, *I.A Richard* up to the period of *Derrida* and *Edward Said*; the participation of women into writing and expressions of opinions is negligible. Women in history were at the onset not even considered human beings! At a stage they were treated as humans, but a lesser or inferior ones.

It was virtually unheard of for a nineteenth century woman to choose the profession of authorship or 'a woman of letters deliberately.' Even the exception of women like Eliot, 'is often under the disguise of a male pseudonym that she wrote are magnum opuses, *Adam Bede* and *Silas Manner!* (Frank 983-42).

In the said 'Canon,' women were not allowed to write and their opinions and ideas were not thought even on issues and matters that bothers on their interests and those that exclusively pertains them.

It seems to me that we are saying less about a feminine style when we notice such concerns than confirming the truism that writers write best when they write about what they know best. Victorian women were expert on interior decoration while Africa women know about cloth and food and the lives of their neighbors' (Frank, pp37).

The argument, that it is only women that can authoritatively talk explicitly about the plight of their fellow sex is not only reasonable but fair judgment. Women, at latter stage of the literary movement, rose to their feet and begin to challenge the male dominated field of literary works. In *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Virginia Woof made a giant

stride that served as a focal point for the study or beginning of feminist criticism in the early twentieth century. It is realized that women generally did not get involved into serious writing, and at that period women were forced to consider writing as an exclusively male profession. Lots of them were just either writing for fun or when it became necessary and as a matter of no alternative they write popular culture stories meant for entertainments.

There were in history, documented struggles against othering in the world over. There was the struggle of the minority settlement against the majority ethnic groups' domination, the colonized against the colonizers, the blacks against the whites or the colored, and all forms of differences and segregations. The history of literary movements that brought about questioning some of the "established" ideas, "established canon" did not leave women aside. Women also got involved in these questionings. Questions like: 'who constructed the canon, when and for whom, on what criteria and to what ends. The notions of *Literature*, 'canon' and literary value' are simultaneously demythologized and destabilized (Widowson, pp 13).

There was the 'women' movement in the 1960s and it was not in any way the beginning of the feminist movement; rather it was just a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action. The movements have been that of women and the case of in-equality in the society. The feminist criticism of the present day is a direct product of the women's movement of the 60's. The movement tries to view and brings out the significant of the image of woman promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and coherence. The idea is concerned with "conditioning" and 'socialization'. It tries to see how relevant, crucial or important is, the distinction existing between the terms, 'Feminist' 'Female' and Feminine". Moi, understood Feminist as a 'Political Position', Female as 'a Matter of Biology' and Feminine as 'a set of culturally define characteristic'. The

difference between female and feminine lays the force of feminism (Barry 1995-122).

The representation of women in literature then, was said to be one of the most important forms of 'socialization' since it provided the role models which indicated to women and men, that what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations is their participation. For instance it is observed by feminist of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century critics that women do not work for a living unless they are driven by dire need and desperate necessity. Instead, the focuses of interest is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfillment in life, or her lack of these.

The main aim and effect of feminism is exposing the cultural mindset in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Hence, women and sometimes men writers indulge in to approaching a critical observation of male dominated writings with the view to emancipate women and give them their proper status in society. In the 1980s the focus of feminist critics changed its direction. It firstly became much more eclectic, i.e. maxims, structuralism, linguistics and etc. It secondly, switched to focus from attacking male versions of the world to the exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. And thirdly, the attention of feminism switched in the need to construct a new canon of women's writing by rewriting the history of the novel and poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.' (Barry, 1995-123)

The modern critics' if at all such name exist, and particularly feminist critics have made their points very clear, 'I believe that our future salvation;' Hedbrum, says in her introduction, 'lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender.' That, much as equality does not mean uniformity, the question of gender domination

has always been the case in human history, since its inception. As we can see with the opening quotation of this paper, Beauvoir opined that humanity is male. That a woman is not defined distinct and independent of man. A lady is relative and subject to the existence of man. Now looking at what has happened in history, and what is happening at the present time about the relationship of men and women in the society, one will find the need for a school of thought, an idea, a notion and an established doctrine that will take upon itself to constructively fought the erroneous misconception and a long standing view that woman folk Butchi Emetcheta, will like to put it 'have been suppressed' to the extent that they have a come to accept the suppression as ideal. They thought that it is fair and just. They consider male oppression and suppression as not only justified but a usual and reasonable thing. Emecheta brought an account of a woman advising her fellow woman not to raise voice on an injustice done to her, just for a single reason that the aggressor (a co-wife of her husband) had a male child and that the victim had none, and that, the male child is the Symbol of her husband s immortality.

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin? ... 'Our (women) life starts in immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life on this sound of his visiting earth. I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business; p.166 - (Palmer 1983 39).

Palmer while commenting on the above said it is as blatant a statement of the male chauvinist position as can be found in the whole African literature. Feminism will like to see the view that women are solely

responsible for not having a male child. and for considering a female child 'immortal, as 'unscientific 'sexist, 'repellent' and almost simple minded.

Now, this brings about the onerous task of feminism, the task of puffing records straight as far as man-woman relationship is concerned. This even led to questioning actually all the 'established' conventions. In fact, the feminism theory goes to the extent of being suspicious even as to the already established codes, norms and designed man-woman relationship by the so call, 'Divine Religion'. Not until there is absolute and complete fairness, equality and justice in a particular verdict, religious pronouncement and positions will have to undergo serious scrutiny and criticism.

Feminism therefore, is in essence, the movement towards, liberation, emancipation, I righting the wrong and setting records straight of women folk that there is nothing men can do, in terms of reason, conscience, thinking and decision which women can not only do, but do it better

Another issue that brought about feminism is the status of women in the society. In the "*Joys of Motherhood*" Emecheta writes:

You are to give her children and foo4 she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them ... A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and old. He matures with age and is dignified (p. 71)

Emecheta, presented her heroine, Nnu Ego as a woman 'who has been so strongly aware of her society's injustice towards the female kind and despite that is forced by the misery and intimidation of the society to accept that the loss of mother hood means loss of woman hood, hence her masculine declaration, 'a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman' (pp 62).

Millets sexual politics (1969 pp147), is the first 'classic' of feminist criticism, it focuses on the twentieth -century male writer, and in the years since its publication, it has become something of a prototype for 'stereotypical' or 'Images of women' feminist criticism. Her study exposed the' **sexist and reductive** images of women perpetuated by such novelist as Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence and Jean Genet, and it quickly inspired a number of similar studies on male writers who have been less than charitable to their female characters.

The general intent of feminism is to show how critics analyze the ways in which writers portray female characters in literary genres and real life—how unfair, demeaning, or chauvinistic male characters have been toward women.

### **Feminist/Womanist theory**

Like most critical tendencies that came through from the 1960s to the present, feminism is of early and later facets. The feminist concern from the 1960s to date is better termed as modern feminism or African Womanism, and it is distinguished from the concerns of the past as having been forged by the same fire as much as poststructuralist as could be seen in their questioning of fixed and stable notions of gender, sexuality and even the category of woman. (Habib, 2011 pp 128). Furthermore, there is this concept of European and American feminism. This also brings us to the African feminism that is peculiarly termed as Womanism. It must be noted that feminism is handled and treated with peculiarity. For instance, an African woman is not likely to succeed if she calls for the brand of the European type of feminism. This is because the African culture and its placement of women are so rooted in African traditional religion, Islam and African Christianity. In the trio, a woman is regarded and considered more of a supporter and sometimes a sexual product of a man. One can hardly fail to see how African traditional religion established a polygamous institution in marriage, to the extent of allowing a man to marry as many as ten or more wives. Islam approves the marriage of four at a time. In these

situations and even in the African brand of Christianity, Thus, feminism is a term that means many things to many people depending on the angle the critique is coming.

### **The Many Facets of Feminist theory**

Just like the Marxist theory that has many facets and different conceptions like the Russian Socialism, the Asian Ba'ath Party, the Chinize Marxism, there is also the different concepts of Postcolonialism as in Kristeva's the Subalterns, Hommi Bhabha's the hybridized and Edwar Said's the Occident and the Orient; Feminism as a school of literary theory also has different facets, forms and concepts arising largely from the different struggles and the challenges of the women struggle and the differences in culture and social settings of the varying communities. History accounted for many types and forms of feminism, among which are: the Anglo-American; the French; the Radical; the Marxist; the Psychoanalytic; the Echo Feminism and finally, the African Womanist theories. These different types are largely accounted for, due to their nature of engagements with the cultures of their immediate environments and how they their combat them.

**African Feminist/Womanist Theory:** The history of African women writers can be traced to Africa's early contact with Islam in as far back as the 12thc to the 15thc. Those writings were in the Arabic scripts. But the modern female writers in the roman scripts like the Egyptian Nawal Elsa'dawiyy the writer of *Women At Point Zero*, the Senegalese Maryama BA, Author of *So Long A Letter*, Nigerians Flora Nwapa, the author of *Effuru*, Buchi Emechetta, the author of *The Joys of Motherhood*, Zaynab Alkali, *The author of The Stillborn* and the Ghanaian Amata Aidou the author of *Effua* and many novels and plays among others seem to admit in the plots and themes of their stories that African woman cannot afford to curve a room of her own and live entirely without a man! Perhaps all they struggle for is the creation of social space and some very relative independence for the African woman.

This is largely because of the exerting influence of African culture on both religion and social lives of the African inhabitants. Polygamy, childbirth, house carouses and more. They only call for relative independence that has to do with spouse choice, owning a property and stuff of such nature. They tried to fight African attitude towards infertility, where the woman is always blamed for it. In the words of Emechetta, a child is a fruit of the womb. In Africa, there are barren women and not men! The wife is blamed for child waywardness. It is to this very clear unfair judgments and treatments that the women scholars seek to write against with the view of changing the narrative. Thus, their class of feminism was referred to as African womanism, mainly concerned with 'construction of gender and patriarchy from a woman's perspective as a departure from the pioneer male literary tradition in African literature (Dahiru, 2020 in Leisure, 1996, pp. 48). They engaged with cultural gender stereotyping of the African female that included critical issues such as polygamy, childbearing and childbirth, motherhood and the subordination of the female to her male partner (Eldred Jones et al 1987, pp. 2). This means that theirs was essentially a call to recognize the woman as complete and comprehensive humankind with all the properties.

**The Anglo-American Feminist Theory:** This brand which was largely more of a movement or the struggle of the liberal humanists is essentially concerned with the simple and mere sovereignty of humans in a relative term and irrespective of gender. It treats literary motif, characterisation, and the handling of literature as a mere representation. Thus Showalter, Gilbert, Stubbs, Brownstein and more heavily critique the theory for its weaknesses.

**The Radical Feminist Theory:** This is essentially the extremists group. They set out to fight, head-on, what they consider as male (patriarchal) dominated world. They view the world as one that is interpreted and dictated by man. They questioned religion and cultural interpretation of the relationship of the two genders. They argue that right from

sexuality; religion and medicine are biased towards women and favour the man. The radical feminists criticize the seeming placement of woman as a product of sexual satisfaction of man and questioned why the woman body should be regarded as a pleasurable thing to a man! They call for uniformity of the two genders in all respect. Non gender is superior to the other; respect and obedience are mutually coexisting.

**The French Feminist Theory:** This brand is largely theoretical and this is because it greatly influenced by the insights of major poststructuralists theorists like Derrida, Foucault and Lacan among others. To French Feminists texts are not representation of reality; rather they are the reproductions of personal voices (Dahiru, 2020 pp 08). Thus, whatever view or opinion a text expresses, should be treated as just one interpretation or a single perception of its author and not to be regarded as a general one. As such, xos and Irigaray, as the major proponents of the theory, largely deals with concerns of say language, representation and psychology other than literature.

**The Marxist Feminist Theory:** This form traces the origin of or genesis of gender inequality to capitalism. Thus the theorists pay more attention to exploitation of what they termed as women's unpaid reproductive labour in a family and other forms of exploitations of women in a capitalist society. They therefore advocate for a redistribution of responsibilities in a family and increased access to education, politics and economy, nothing should be taken for granted. Angela Davies, Claudia Jones and Evelyn Reed are among its pioneering proponent.

**The Psychoanalytic Feminist Theory:** This theory thrives on the Freudian psychoanalysis, whe it asks of how the process of becoming a woman occurs? The theorists argue that the process of childhood experience stereotyped the girl child into becoming a woman different from a man. Thus it seeks to psychologically change the psyche of a female in the way and manner she handles her experiences with her

emotion, body and sexuality. That woman should learn to resist subjugation and exploitation by man through culture and religion. Jane Flax, Juliet Mitchell, Butler Judith and Kofman Sarah are its early major proponents.

**The Echo-Feminist Theory:** Greta Gaard, Carol Adams and Ynestra King are some of the proponents of this theory' their major grouse is the way and manner the patriarchal man attributes every weak or weakling creature (animals and plants alike) to the female gender. That weakness is baselessly attributed to female gender.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, the paper examines the basic rudiments that constitute feminism, feminist literary theory and the varied interpretations of its concepts. It is evident that while the term has evolved alongside human civilization, it also takes different forms depending on various cultures and civilizations. As such, while European Feminism, American Feminism, and Asian Feminism exist; there is also a brand of African Feminism often referred to as Womanism. This distinction arises because, like Marxism, new historicism, and other theoretical frameworks, feminism is shaped by the sociocultural and religious contexts of the societies that practice it. Ultimately, feminist literary theory seeks to create space for women and advocates for their emancipation from patriarchal dominance.

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