

FEMINISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM

What is feminism

- The term feminism comprises varying social, political and cultural movements, theories and moral philosophies which are concerned with gender inequality and equal rights (de Lauretis, 1990).
- The basic underlying factor of feminism is the concern for gender equality and equal rights.
- As a movement, feminism started in the West. It refers to series of social and political campaigns for reforms on women's issues created by the inequality between men and women.
- As an ideology, feminism aims at understanding gender inequalities, and focuses on power relations between the sexes.

Feminism as a literary theory

- As a theory, feminist literary theory is a female-sexed and female–embodied social subject whose constitution is to
 - correct conflictual histories of women
 - correct the masculinist historical, social and literary images of women as ‘others’.
- The theory seeks to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices in literary texts and strives to change the social division of the sexes by striving to promote a discovery and re-evaluation of literature by women as well as evaluate the social, cultural and psychological contexts of literature and criticism (Tyson, 2000).

Major waves of Feminism

- First wave (1920s)
 - Mainly concerned with women's material disadvantages compared to men.
 - They focused on social, political and economic reform.
 - Some major advocates of this wave include:
 - ❖ Virginia Wolf,
 - ❖ Olivia Brown,
 - ❖ Mary Wollstonecraft
 - ❖ Elizabeth Anton.
 - These women spoke against gender stereotypes, failure to regard the woman as an individual with her own rights and the need for women to gain access to formal education.
 - One of the key strands within this movement is the liberal feminists.

Second wave

- Second wave feminism focused on
 - the politics of reproduction
 - women's experience
 - sexual difference and sexuality both as a form of oppression and something to celebrate.
- Some of the major advocates of this wave include
 - Betty Friedan
 - Adrienne Rich
 - Mary Dally
 - Charlotte Bunch
- Some of the key strands within this movement is the
 - radical feminism
 - lesbian feminism
 - Social/Marxist feminism.

Third wave

- Third wave feminist criticism focusses on three major issues:
 - the politics of universalism
 - current controls and misrepresentation
 - the homogeneity of feminism.
- Third wave feminism seeks to overcome the question of difference.
- Some of the major advocates of this wave include
 - Bell Hooks
 - Julia Kristeva
 - Patricia Hill Collins
 - Gayathri Spivak.

Key thinkers within the feminist movement - Adrienne Rich

“When we dead awaken: writing as revision”

- She is a feminist writer who has written and published several books including six collections of poems of which the last is “The Will to Change”.
- In her writings, such as “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, she projects the freedom of women from what she describes as men’s terror.
- She lives in New York and teaches at the City College, City University of New York. During the 1972-73.
- She was the Fannie Hurst Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Brandeis University.

Adrienne Rich: “When we dead awaken: writing as revision”

- The essay goes back to the Fifties, a very difficult period for women, and female writers
 - Writing clearly dominated by men.
- At that time women had a very traditional role
 - as a wife
 - A mother
 - muse for male engaged with domestic activities.
- Rich can be considered a pioneer, because she was one of those women who managed to be a wife, mother and writer successfully.
- However, Adrienne Rich herself struggled to find her identity and free her imagination and expression.
- In her essay, she is trying to gain her “female voice”, and persuade other females to do so as well.

Adrienne Rich: “When we dead awaken: writing as revision”

- Her style in writing was formed by male poets, and in general, women writers adopted the “masculine style” in order to be accepted as writers. Rich tries to “awaken consciousness”.
- She insists that in order for women to find their own voice they should
 - look back in time, with “fresh eyes” in order to be aware of the myth of woman’s role in society, a thing she describes as “re-vision”.
- Adrienne Rich, strongly supports the idea of “re-vision” and describes it as “an act of survival” in modern male-dominated society, so they can express
 - their own ideas and feelings as females
 - and not be under the shade of men or even trapped by their dominance.

Adrienne Rich: “When we dead awaken: writing as revision”

- . Even though at this point women are not on the spotlight, in order for them to regain their voice, one thing is very important to her, as she notes:

We need to know the writing of the past,
and know it differently than we have known it;
not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us.

- She encourages women to break out of their closed shells to do what they want, rather than following what society says they must do.

Adrienne Rich: "When we dead awaken: writing as revision"

- Rich believed that the anger felt by women throughout the ages was necessary for creativity and change to flourish.
- The "victimization and anger experienced by women are real", according to Rich, "and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structure of thought."
- Rich speaks of "a new generation of women poets" moving towards the "new space" on the boundaries of patriarchy.
- Women, according to Rich, are "speaking to and of women due to a newly unleashed courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration.
- Rich ends the essay by stating that women have much to do, as the "creative energy of patriarchy is running out, leaving only its self-generating energy for destruction.

Virginia Woolf “A Room of One’s Own”

- The essay establishes the role and conditions of women in the society and how it is not possible to tell an objective story of women and fiction.
- Woolf, a woman who writes fiction, creates a fictional woman who tells how she came to have a view about women and fiction.
- The subject of women and fiction raises all sorts of prejudices and emotions.
- The reason a woman needs a room of her own to make fiction is privacy and solitude are necessary for writing/creation.
- “A Room of One’s Own” is a metaphor of any
 - privilege
 - opportunity
 - ResourceTo help the woman develop on her own

Virginia Woolf “A Room of One’s Own”

☐ According to Woolf, a woman must

- have money
- a room of her own if she is to write.

☐ Woolf also presents that centuries of prejudice and financial and educational advantages and disadvantages have inhibited women’s creativity.

☐ Her essay is constructed as a partly-fictionalized narrative of the thinking that led her to adopt this thesis.

☐ In a dramatic way, Woolf carefully presents the experiences available to men and women as well as on more material differences in their lives.

Virginia Woolf “A Room of One’s Own”

- She identifies an unfair treatment for women after looking at the experiences available to men against those available to women.
- She perused all the scholarship on women and realized that all were written by “angry” men.
- Turning to history, she finds so little data about the everyday lives of women that she decides to reconstruct their existence imaginatively.
- She considers the achievements of the major women novelists of the nineteenth century and reflects on the importance of tradition to an aspiring writer.
- Woolf closes the essay with an exhortation to her audience of women to take up the tradition that has been so hardly bequeathed to them, and to increase the endowment for their own daughters.
- Thus, she proposes that women can have voice to redefine their fate if they pick up the act of writing about their own experience.

Carole Boyce Davies: “Some notes on African Feminism”

- In this essay, Davies offers an assessment of previous scholarly works on feminism and African feminism in particular.
- Her aim is to allow the reader to retrace the development of feminist concern in African literary criticism and draw an independent conclusions about feminism.
- Davies identifies four goals for African feminist criticism:
 - Reexamining the stereotypical images of women in African literature: submissive and no power.
 - The elaboration of a feminist aesthetic in the work of African literature.
 - The representation of the role and presentation of women in African traditional literatures.

Carole Boyce Davies: “Some notes on African Feminism”

- The reevaluation or uncovering of women’s function and image within traditional African literature.
 - Without the understanding of such traditions, these attempt to critique will be vague or empty.
- She establishes that the social and historical realities of the lives of African women need to be examined before writing about African woman.
- Drawing on the views of Filomina Steady who examines the commonalities of experiences and response of African women to define African feminism, she establishes that
 - African feminist thoughts are molded by the cultural context within which the African woman lives.
- According to Filomina Steady, traditional rights and responsibilities of women make the African woman, in practice, much more a feminist than her European counterpart.

Carole Boyce Davies: “Some notes on African Feminism”

- Boyce Davies cites Ogunjipe Leslie’s idea about the experiences of the African women to foreground her views on African feminism.
- Boyce Davies uses the metaphor of the “mountain” to explain that the African woman has additional burden on her than women from other worlds.
- Boyce Davies talks about the socio-economic conditions of women in Africa within the realities of culture and development.
- The burdens include:
 - Oppression from outside (foreign intrusion)
 - Heritage of tradition (societal restrictions)
 - Her own backwardness and its effects
 - Male domination

Carole Boyce Davies: “Some notes on African Feminism”

- For these factors, the African woman’s experiences or realities are very much different from that of women in the western context.
- The realities of the African woman is conditioned by
 - their own self image
 - ideologies of patriarchy
 - gender hierarchy.
- For this reason, Davies feels that the feminist ideologies of women in the world differ from context to context because the realities of women differ from one context to the other.
- Thus, feminism, in whichever form, is contextual.

Sample questions

- Explain “feminism” from the following perspectives:
 - i. as an ideology
 - ii. as a movement
 - iii. as a theory
 - iv. What is the main objective of Feminism?
- What is the message in Adrienne Rich’s essay, “When we dead awaken: writing as a revision”.
- What does Woolf mean by the assertion that a woman must have a room of her own.
- How does feminism in the African context different from other cultures.
- Identify points of convergence and divergence in the three essays you have just discussed.