

**Chapter - II**  
**Feminist Literary Critical Perspectives**

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### FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

#### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I discussed the biography of Winifred Holtby and her place in inter-war period writers. Winifred Holtby was herself a feminist and so I have chosen to explore her fictional world and her feminist consciousness. Since studies of feminist consciousness have to be necessarily grounded in feminist literary critical discourse, it is essential to discuss the various feminist literary critical perspectives and the issues they have raised regarding woman and literature and language. To elaborate the concept of feminist perspective, an attempt has been made to present a brief review of the major trends in this field.

'Feminist' or 'feminism' are political terms, which support the aims of new women's movement, that emerged in the late 1960's. And feminist criticism is a specific kind of critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy, sexism and women's oppression. Feminist literary criticism developed with women's liberation movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is said to be the first modern work of feminist criticism. While explaining feminist criticism we must look at the definition, aims and assumptions of feminist criticism. Various

definitions of feminism and feminist criticism are attempted by scholars. Maggie Humm states that,

“feminist criticism is a tool for analysis of universal feminism and it should aim at providing us with an altogether new awareness of women’s role in modern complex world.”

(Singh, 1991, P. 11)

Ruth Brandwein defines it as,

“a perspective- a thought structure, a value system that is an alternative way of viewing the world.”

(Vasas, 1990, P. 5)

Emphasizing the political nature of feminist critic, Toril Moi defines

Feminist criticism as,

“a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism.”

(Moi, 1986, P. 204)

Emphasizing the aim behind feminism, Andrea Dworkin says,

“The feminist project is to end male domination; in order to do so, we will have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, its art, its churches, its laws, its nuclear families based on father- right and nation states; all of the images, institutions customs and habits which define women as worthless and invisible victim.”

(Dworkin, 1976, pp. 61-62)

With reference to all these definitions, we can say that the feminist literary criticism studies literature in the light of its ideology. In the feminist literature gender experience becomes the major concern. It believes that feminist literature can be a significant instrument for grounding the feminist values. Feminist literary criticism analyzes literary texts to see the role and positions of men and women and their gendered subjectivities. It examines the representation of women in literature and exposes the stereotypical representation of women in it. Women's roles and positions were viewed as stereotyped images in literary texts. Stereotyping results from the basic idea of identifying -

“the fully human with the male to see women as flat embodiments of particular force or theme, to see them mythically, allegorically, symbolically but never realistically, as fully rounded complex human beings”.

(Yeazell, 1874, P. 29)

Women are always stereotyped as angels or goddesses or monsters but not as human beings. Another process of stereotyping is what Gilbert and Gubar call “linguistic misogyny”. (Gilbert and Gubar, 1988, P. 21) which paints women as stupid, babbling creatures whose words are incoherent, sheer nonsense and destructive.

Helene Cixous, by deconstructing the fairy tale of the “sleeping beauty” shows how passivity in women has been seen as

desirable. A beauty, who is sleeping not living but only existing, is acceptable. Beautiful dolls dancing to the tunes of their husbands are welcome, but living, thinking individual is not:

“She sleeps, she is intact, eternal, absolutely powerless. He has no doubt that she has been waiting for him forever. The secret of her beauty, kept for him: she has the perfection of something finished. Or not begun. However, she is breathing. Just enough life and not too much. Then he will kiss her. So that when she opens her eyes she will see only him; him in place of everything, all –him.... She is lying down, he stands up. She aries –end of the dream –what follows is socio-cultural; he makes her lots of babies, she spends her youth in labour; from bed to bed, until the thing isn’t “women” for him anymore.”

(Cixous, 1975, P. 66)

Elaine Showalter also argued that

“if we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics and limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt, but only what men have thought women should be.”

(Showalter, 1986, P. 130)

Thus the feminist critics find that a woman is often ‘marginalized’ ‘repressed’ or ‘silenced’ in the literary works. So feminist criticism seeks to reinterpret the works of earlier authors of both sexes as part of its programme. It exposes the misconceptions and culturally conditioned responses as built in literary texts. Feminist criticism seeks to demythologize the myth that man is the universal

representative of humanity and women are unnamed and the invisible.

Hence, they believed there is need for women writers to write their own literature which provides centrality to women in everyway-thematically, structurally and stylistically.

Male critics often assess a woman's writing on the premise that any book written by a woman is necessarily inferior. Male critics use personal life of the women writers to interpret their fiction. Such sexist bias in male critics is termed as "phallic criticism" by Mary Ellman, she says,

"Books by women authors are treated as if they were women themselves, and criticism embarks ,at its happiest ,upon an intellectual measuring of hips and busts."

(Ellman, 1968, P. 29)

Feminist criticism attempts to revise the traditional 'patriarchal' canon by bringing to consciousness and into print a number of previously neglected books. It exposes sexist bias in the mainstream "canon" which deliberately marginalizes works of women writers. Joanna Russ gives the example of writers who were widely read and critically acclaimed in their own times but who had, over the years, been so discredited as to be forgotten or even damned. Virginia Woolf had found a place in the canon but only

after the radical, political edge of her work had been blunted. Her feminist works such as *A Room Of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), rarely feature in critical discussions, though her experiments with the stream of consciousness technique are well-known. <sup>the</sup> writer like Emily Dickinson never received the serious attention .

That's why Elaine Showalter set out to trace "the female literary tradition" in her book *A Literature of Their Own*. She goes through English fiction from 1840s to the present day. According to her 'any minority group, finds its self-expression relative to a dominant society'. She posits three major phases : first, imitation, second one of protest, and third 'a phase of self-discovery' a search for identity, - in women writers..

From the discussion above, we can point out the aims of feminist literary criticism -

1. To examine male texts to point out the way women are represented in these, according to prevailing social and cultural and ideological norms e.g. Women are represented as passive, docile and selfless.
2. To reconstruct the literary history of neglected women writers and women's oral culture.

3. To confront the problem of the 'feminist reader' by offering readers new models and a fresh critical perspective on culture and society.
4. To make us act as feminist readers by creating new writing and reading collectives.

We can also look at the achievements of feminist criticism as :

1. Highlighting gender stereotyping as an important feature of literary form.
2. Giving reasons for the persistent reproduction of such stereotypes
3. Discovery of lost or ignored examples of women's literature.

All these aims and achievements of feminist criticism become significant while studying Winifred Holtby's fictional world.

The present study belongs to the tradition of gynocriticism, which according to Elaine Showalter tries to analyze women's writing from women's perspectives within a patriarchal culture. Elaine Showalter coined the phrase 'gynocriticism' to describe what is commonly known as woman-centered criticism. She identifies the need for a form of criticism that is woman-centered, independent of men and which tries to find answers to the questions that come from women's experiences. It is concerned with the woman as writer, with the history, psychology, structure, language and meaning of



literature written by woman. And so while analysing Winifred Holtby the gynocritical line of inquiry becomes significant. Before proceeding with the critical inquiry into the fictional world of the text, it is essential to discuss the issues and the concerns of the various divergent lines of thinking within feminist literary criticism. This review will also be useful for evolving a method for the analysis of the novel, to explore into the thematic issues regarding gender relations that the novel raises. This discussion will therefore be useful for clarifying the feminist perspective, with which I am going to explore the fictional world of Winifred Holtby.

Feminist criticism is concerned with questioning the place of women and women's writing in the existing system of values. Feminists question the situation of women in society generally. They examine literature and deconstruct restrictive images which the male writer has created of females.

Feminist criticism tries to make us aware about the injustice and oppression women have to undergo, their secondary status, perception of processes of gender construction and women's subordination in family and society.

There are various branches of feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism deals with literature as an important ideological construct and as a repository of images which has

considerable impact on our perception of the world. Feminist criticism draws on discursive strategies like Marxist feminism and radical feminism. These perspectives have been used for understanding woman's subordinate status for evolving strategies to establish women's equality. The Radical feminist's main contention is that the roots of subordination lie in the biological family, the hierarchical sexual division of society and differential sex roles. For them, patriarchy is the central organizing principle. Marxist feminism or socialist feminism believes that women's inferior status is rooted in private property and class division in society.

Radical feminists were influenced greatly by the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir. Her book *The Second Sex* (1964) is a pioneering work in the study of feminist criticism in which she discussed the concept of womanhood and femininity in detail. She established with great clarity the fundamental questions of modern feminism. According to her, a woman's consciousness gets defined by the reference to man. For example, when a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying, "I am a woman". No man would do so. The fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Man defines human, not woman. The humanity is male and the woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man. He is the 'subject' and she is the 'other'. Literature, among

other cultural practices, reveals the otherness of woman. She is always treated as the lack, absence and the 'other in the society'. Throughout history, women have been constructed, as man's other. Aristotle declared that "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities". And Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an "imperfect man". Some believe that "woman is a womb".

Simon de Beauvoir explains how woman's independence can be recovered. She discusses it in the light in which woman is viewed by biology, psychology and historical materialism.

It is assumed that biological consideration of woman constitutes as an essential element in her situation in the society. They are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. Simon de Beauvoir argues that biologically woman is considered weak and man superior. So otherness gives subordinate place to woman in patriarchal society.

In the first part of her book 'Facts and Myths', de Beauvoir makes a study of sexism in the works of some selected authors, in the second part "Women's Life Today", she deals with the matter of women's education. Woman is trained to think herself as inferior. According to de Beauvoir, for emancipation, women must seek professional autonomy and financial independence and also avoid marriage and children.

Simon de Beauvoir concludes that women should be freed from the bonds of slavery. She finds sharing the only solution to the problem of man-woman relationship.

Beauvoir's major contribution to feminist literary criticism was in the form of her critical analysis of myths, tales and fables which posit binary oppositions, representing the 'subject' and the 'other'. For example man is 'seed', woman is 'ground', or 'man is sun', woman 'darkness'.

During 1970, a group of radical feminists advocated their theories of equality. In this period, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Eva Figs's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) appeared. Defining radical feminism, Shulamith Firestone observes:

"In the Radical feminist view, the new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality. It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history. Its aim : overthrow of the oldest, most rigid class/ caste system in existence, the class system based on sex relation, lending archetypal male and female roles on undeserved sexual legitimacy and seeming performance. The western feminist movement is the dawn of a long struggle to break free from the oppressive power structure set up by nature and reinforced by men."

(Firestone, 1970, P. 16)

Radical feminists reject any kind of discrimination on the basis of sex and declare in the epigraph of one of the books on the subject:

**“The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces but in our institutions---woman is made, not born”.**

**(Gornick and Moran, 1972, P.22)**

The radical group rejects outright the institution of marriage and considers it as an organized rape. The members of this group in the process of “consciousness raising” came together against the men and confined to women of the group their adverse experiences at the hands of men. They also evolved a new vocabulary like “Consciousness –raising” which means making women conscious of their subordinate position to men in the society and questioning this subordination. “Male chauvinism” means the assumption that male needs and capabilities are superior to those of women. “Sexist” means to prejudge role by gender. “Sex-object” means a woman seen primarily in terms of sexual attractiveness to men.

The Radical feminists demanded equal educational and career opportunities and also a drastic reorganization of society and gender roles. They wanted that women should be united to achieve self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-respect and together they should fight. Thus the concept of “sisterhood” was born which means women must develop friendship and gain their identification with one another. In a patriarchal society they have been separated from each other. According to Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley the “concept of sisterhood means much more than sharing work or responsibility.

It involves a redefinition of the value and status of personal experience. The personal becomes the political; that is, the nature of women's oppression can be analyzed through the medium of accounts of private experiences". (Harmondsworth, 1976, P.11)

The Radicals further suggest that woman must not be a slave to her biological functions. Child bearing must be voluntary and hence, woman must have the right to have abortion on demand. Feminists condemn prostitution and rape and advise sisters to defend themselves against it.

Kate Millet is one of the most important radical feminists. She is known to have founded the discipline of studying "images of women in literature." In her book *Sexual Politics*, she presents a framework of beliefs on which the patriarchal system is based. According to her, sexual politics is the method by which one sex (male) seeks to maintain and extend its power over the other (female) sex. She uses the term 'patriarchy' for the domination of males over females. According to her, our whole life, personal and social, is organized by patriarchy, which results in asymmetrical relations of power. She also shows how the patriarchal bias operates in culture and is reflected in literature.

The patriarchal system rules all over the world. The roles of women are fixed. In terms of activity, sex role as domestic service

and care of infants are assigned to females and rest of human achievement, interest and ambition to the male. This limited repertoire of roles allotted to woman tends to arrest her at the biological experience. Thus patriarchy has determined the roles of women in the family and has given women subordinate position in all spheres of the society.

Radical feminists also evolved a method for analysing literature and exposing the gender biases in it. In her analysis of literary texts, Kate Millett attacked the concept of patriarchal dominion. Through her incisive analysis of language, imagery and themes in several literary texts, she demonstrated how patriarchy subordinates the female and treats her as an inferior being. How the images and the language used by male writers represent power to rule over women and inferior males is the core of her criticism of literary texts.

Kate Millet also subjected religious texts like the Bible, myths like Pandora to incisive feminist scrutiny. She argued that established literature reinforces the stereotypical images of women and strengthens the prejudices against them. For example, women are associated with sexuality, evil powers; they are subjected to rape, aggression, hatred and very often literature also portrays them in such a way that they appear as titillating ramps, as laughing stocks

which produces laughter, titillation, embarrassment among men and women. Women also learn to view themselves from the male eyes – as physical objects, sexual icons, or vile, subordinate beings. Western literature, Millet claimed, has reinforced the feeling that “woman is a damnable race, a plague men have to live with”, it strengthens the belief that woman is an unclean, sinful, debilitating sexual object. She argued that women had to counter this sexual politics.

If radical feminists talked about gender biased representations of women in literature and language, Simone de Beauvoir elaborated upon the significance of mythological tales, religious philosophies in the exploration of gendered representation and women in literature. She demonstrated how the principle of ‘binary division’ operates in the depiction of male and female characters how even images of nature are subsumed under it.

If radical feminists analyzed patriarchy in literary representations, Marxist feminists broadened the framework and discussed how women’s oppression was a product of the economic system based on exploitation.

Michele Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today* is an important book for Marxist literary feminism. Barrett sought to analyze the class position of women and also commented on the importance of ideology in literary works.



According to Radical feminists, the original and basic contradiction is between male and female sex. According to the traditional Marxists, women's subordination is a result of economic exploitative structure. They argue that once private property is abolished and women join the labour force, patriarchy would disappear. So the primary contradiction for them is not between sexes but between classes. And if women join labour force they will be free from oppression. The traditional Marxist approach also provided a significant analysis of 'family'.

Marxist feminists argue that women's oppression is based on unpaid housework, childbearing, childcare which are activities, which restrict women's access to an equal status. So the marriage contract is a labour contract for the woman. Her domestic labour is never rewarded. The sociocultural rigidity that marriage imposes on the individual is intolerable to women. Marxist feminists try to tackle this problem in terms of class value. The processes of gender construction are important for the Marxists. They differentiate between 'sex' and 'gender'. There are differences between physical characteristics of males and females and personality and behavioral characteristic attaches with them in specific cultural and historical situations. Gender is culturally shaped and sex is biologically. The Marxist feminists argue that it is important to discuss how gender is

constructed in literature. To expose the various ideological processes of gender construction, Michele Barrette has proposed four processes of gender construction in literature.

1. The process of 'stereotyping' restricts images of women. Roles of women in home from dutiful and glamorous hostess to caring mother are portrayed in literature. This is the glorification of domesticity.
2. The strategy of 'compensation' refers to the representation of ideas to elevate the 'moral value of femininity'; to conceal women's oppression, they are honored sometimes. Women are always shown as angels or Goddess or monsters but not as human beings. Motherhood, a sacrificing wife is always put on a pedestal and glorified.
3. The process of "collusion" which means that women are shown to be willing to be oppressed or to be collaborators in oppression.
4. "Recuperation" is the strategy used for subverting the challenges posed by them.

These processes are important for constructing the meaning of the text. K.K. Ruthven also gives different categories of feminism, which are used by feminists to analyse literature. According to Ruthven,

“there are sociofeminists whose interest in the roles assigned to women in our society prompt studies of the ways in which women are represented in literary texts. There are semio-feminists whose point of departure is semiotics, the science of signs, and who study the signifying practices by means which females are coded and classified as women in order to be assigned their social roles. There are psychofeminists who ferage in Freud and Lacan for a theory of feminine sexuality unconstrained by male norms and categories and who examine literary texts for conscious articulation of feminine desires or trances of where it has been repressed, there are Marxist feminist more interested in oppression and repression.”

(Ruthven, 1984, P.19)

So feminist critics have studied literature with a view to expose the gender biases, asymmetrical representation of men and women characters and myths and author's perception of gender roles. Kate Millet, Gilbert and Guber, Ellen Mores have studied images of women, biases about women as reflected in language. They also thought about patriarchy, family, man-woman relationship reflected in literature.

This review that we have taken of the major Feminist Criticism perspectives helps us formulate some basic principles to evolve a method for the analysis of the literary text. What are the ideological foundations of the fictional world? What are the themes? What are the narrative techniques implied by the writers? Do the characters represent some kind of role models? How does the writer

resist, and challenge established and dominant ideas regarding gender relations? How does the work represent a perspective of looking at the socio-cultural and political reality of gender relations in the contemporary society? All of these questions present interesting direction for the study of fictional works by women writers like Winifred Holtby. However, it is very difficult to study elaborately all of these aspects of her work, in the short span of this dissertation. Therefore, we have attempted here to single out some areas for critical inquiry. We have chosen to concentrate on the major themes that emerge in her novel *The South Riding*. The representation of gender conflict and characterization as well as her experimentation with conventions from popular fiction to write about serious gender issues.

In the following chapters, we have made an attempt to present our analysis of some of these issues as they are presented in *South Riding*. Though she was a prolific writer in 1930s, she was never a part of established literary tradition. There has always been a dearth of critical studies on such women writers. Critical works on Holtby are not abundant. Quite a few critical works on her, however, are available on the internet and I was benefitted by them. But her novels are like unchartered paths and our exploration of these has been presented in the next two chapters.