

**THE EVOLUTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM DURING THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY.**

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Abstract: This study offers a systematic examination of the origins and historical development of women's literary tradition alongside feminist criticism within European and American cultural and historical frameworks. It analyzes the principal phases in the evolution of feminist theoretical discourse in literary studies, beginning with early manifestations of women's writing and the emergence of critical self-consciousness, and extending to the formal institutionalization of feminist discourse in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Gender; women's writing; literary canon; authorship; Virginia Woolf; Jane Austen; literary history; gender representation.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolda Yevropa va Amerika madaniy-tarixiy makonida ayollar adabiy an'anasining shakllanishi hamda feministik tanqidning evolyutsiyasini tizimli-nazariy jihatdan tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot doirasida adabiyotshunoslikda feministik nazariy fikrning rivojlanish bosqichlari, xususan, ilk ayollar yozuvi shakllarining paydo bo'lishi, tanqidiy o'zlikni anglash jarayonining shakllanishi va XX asrga kelib feministik diskursning institutsional darajada qaror topishi kompleks tarzda ko'rib chiqiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: gender, ayollar adabiyoti, adabiy kanon, mualliflik, Virjiniya Vulf, Jeyn Ostin, adabiyot tarixi, gender reprezentatsiyasi.

Аннотация: Настоящая статья представляет собой системное исследование генезиса и развития женской литературной традиции, а также феминистской критики в рамках европейского и американского культурно-исторического контекста. Рассматриваются ключевые этапы становления феминистской теоретической мысли в литературоведении — от ранних форм женского письма и зарождения критического самосознания до институционализации феминистского дискурса в XX веке.

Ключевые слова: гендер, женская литература, литературный канон, авторство, Вирджиния Вулф, Джейн Остин, история литературы, гендерная репрезентация.

In the twentieth century, the emergence of feminist literary thought, evident in the works of novelists such as Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and later Virginia Woolf, contributed to the formation of a distinct tradition of feminist literary criticism. This critical orientation comprises diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to literary analysis. Despite their differences, feminist critics generally aim to challenge the established literary canon, which has historically been shaped within patriarchal contexts and has frequently represented women as morally and physically subordinate. Feminist criticism thus reinterprets literary texts from a female-centered perspective, developing analytical models grounded in female subjectivity, often referred to as gynocriticism. This approach foregrounds the ways in which cultural and social structures shape women's identities, as well as how female embodiment, language, and psychological experience are represented in literature and related to the act of writing.

Broader developments in twentieth-century literary theory both built upon and reacted against nineteenth-century aesthetic and philosophical traditions. As Raman Selden observes, many modern critical approaches are characterized as “anti-Romantic, anti-humanist, and anti-empiricist,” insofar as they reject the privileging of emotional expression, the notion of a unified and stable human subject, and the assumption that knowledge is derived primarily from observation and experience. The early twentieth century thus marked a decisive shift away from traditional humanistic and moralistic modes of criticism toward a renewed focus on the literary text itself, particularly its formal, structural, and organizational properties. This formalist orientation subsequently informed the development of three major critical schools: Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism.

Early twentieth-century literary theory also sought to separate aesthetic value from moral and religious evaluation, conceptualizing the aesthetic as a domain that transcends rational, practical, and utilitarian concerns. In this view, literature functioned as a form of resistance to the perceived effects of industrialized, commercialized, and increasingly dehumanized modern society. Concurrently, critics attempted to establish literary criticism as a systematic and quasi-scientific discipline. Although this broadly humanist orientation was later revised and contested, it continued to influence significant figures such as F. R. Leavis and remained embedded, in various forms, even within critical approaches that explicitly opposed it.

Many major developments in twentieth-century literary theory—from Formalism and New Criticism to poststructuralism—emerged in response to periods of significant historical and political transformation. Such contexts produced complex and sometimes ambivalent effects on literary production and critical thought. For example, following the Russian Revolution of 1917, Soviet cultural policy ultimately institutionalized “socialist realism” as the official aesthetic doctrine, requiring

literature to serve ideological and political objectives and to represent class struggle. At the same time, the revolutionary period also generated alternative intellectual and artistic movements, including Symbolism and Formalism. In particular, Formalism later contributed to the emergence of Structuralism, which privileged the analysis of textual form and structural relations while largely decentering the human subject, whether conceived in political, psychological, or philosophical terms. In this sense, certain critical approaches withdrew from overt political engagement in favor of formal analysis; however, this apparent withdrawal itself can be interpreted as carrying implicit ideological and political implications.

Feminist literary criticism, by contrast, examines the ways in which literary and cultural texts reproduce or contest systems of economic, political, social, and psychological oppression directed at women. It interrogates the fundamentally patriarchal structures embedded in culture and seeks to uncover both explicit and implicit forms of misogyny. As Tyson observes, gender bias may also be evident in domains such as modern medicine, where clinical practices historically privileged male subjects in research. Feminist criticism further addresses the marginalization of women writers within the literary canon, arguing that without a feminist interpretive framework, female authorship is frequently underrepresented or overlooked. Despite methodological diversity, feminist approaches converge on a shared concern with gender inequality and the representation of women.

The feminist movement in the United States and internationally developed as a broader socio-political effort aimed at achieving gender equality, exerting significant influence on twentieth-century American society. In the early decades of the century, women's activism focused on securing suffrage, culminating in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Later, feminist advocacy centered on the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which ultimately failed in the late 1970s but played a significant role in mobilizing political awareness around gender equality.

Between 1917 and the early 1960s, the combined effects of two world wars and economic expansion led to increased female participation in the workforce. During this period, many women, including educated homemakers, began to critically reassess their social and economic status, articulating a widespread sense of dissatisfaction that Betty Friedan famously described in *The Feminine Mystique* as “the problem that has no name.” The rise of civil rights activism and student movements in the 1960s further encouraged feminist engagement in challenging established social norms through strategies such as consciousness-raising, protest activity, public demonstration, and political lobbying.

The institutionalization of second-wave feminism in the United States began in 1966 with the establishment of the National Organization for Women (NOW), led by prominent activists including Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, and

Gloria Steinem. These figures engaged in legislative advocacy and policy reform aimed at addressing gender inequality. Numerous affiliated organizations subsequently emerged to promote reproductive rights, workplace equality, protection for homemakers, and support services for survivors of domestic violence. In the early 1970s, feminist groups developed comprehensive policy agendas, culminating in the 1975 National Women's Agenda, which was submitted to key governmental authorities. The 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston further produced a series of resolutions intended to guide public policy, while organizations such as "Now" and the National Women's Political Caucus continued to shape political discourse and maintain public visibility for feminist causes.

During the 1980s, the feminist movement encountered both a conservative political backlash and significant internal fragmentation. Critics contended that mainstream feminism had predominantly reflected the experiences and interests of white, middle- and upper-class women, while insufficiently addressing the specific conditions of working-class, African American, and Hispanic women. As a result, feminist discourse diversified into multiple strands, including liberal feminism, which emphasized individual legal and political rights; radical feminism, which conceptualized women as a structurally oppressed social class; and lesbian feminism, which increasingly aligned itself with broader gay liberation movements.

The legislative advances achieved during the 1970s, such as efforts toward the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and landmark reproductive rights decisions including *Roe v. Wade*, came under sustained challenge from conservative and anti-feminist mobilization, most notably associated with figures such as Phyllis Schlafly. Additional resistance emerged from political leadership, including the administration of President Ronald Reagan, as well as from segments of the female population who perceived feminist discourse as antagonistic toward men. These factors collectively contributed to a more constrained political environment for feminist activism.

Despite these constraints, feminist advocacy continued to focus on issues such as reproductive autonomy, wage equality, affirmative action policies, workplace sexual harassment, and the legal treatment of sexual violence. In historiographical terms, the feminist movement is frequently periodized into three "waves": the first wave, associated with early suffrage campaigns; the second wave, spanning the 1960s through the 1980s; and the third wave, emerging in the 1990s. The third wave retained core commitments to gender equality while placing greater emphasis on institutional engagement, transnational activism, and intersectional analyses of race, class, and gender, alongside broader concerns with global justice and human rights.

Historically, social systems have assigned differentiated roles, norms, and cognitive expectations to men and women, constructing gender as a social category derived from biological sex differences. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

England, prevailing ideological frameworks positioned middle- and upper-class women primarily within the domestic sphere, assigning them responsibilities for household management and caregiving while promoting ideals of modesty, sexual restraint, and self-effacement. Women were often discouraged from asserting independent intellectual or political agency, particularly in opposition to male authority structures. Such gender norms significantly restricted women's access to education, leisure, economic autonomy, and cultural production, thereby shaping their participation as writers, readers, critics, and literary subjects.

This imbalance is reflected in literary discourse itself, as illustrated by Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, where Anne Elliot observes that "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story... the pen has been in their hands," highlighting the historical male dominance of narrative authority. Consequently, literature and related cultural institutions developed within predominantly patriarchal frameworks, prompting feminist approaches that seek to recover and foreground women's perspectives within textual interpretation.

Educational opportunities, patterns of social experience, and access to leisure resources further shaped women's engagement with literature. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, female education in middle- and upper-class contexts was often limited to moral instruction and socially oriented accomplishments such as music, drawing, and basic linguistic training. Although female literacy rates were initially lower than those of men, they gradually increased throughout the nineteenth century, reaching a point where basic literacy became widespread among women by the mid-century.

With expanding access to leisure time and the growth of circulating libraries, periodical publications, and serialized fiction, women increasingly constituted a significant portion of the reading public. By the late nineteenth century, as noted by Anthony Trollope, the readership of novels had become socially extensive, encompassing individuals across class hierarchies - from political elites to domestic servants—thereby reflecting both the democratization of reading practices and the growing influence of female readership on literary production and popular taste.

Gender-based disparities also significantly shaped the conditions of women's authorship. In eighteenth-century literary discourse, Alexander Pope famously disparaged Eliza Haywood in overtly misogynistic terms, characterizing her writing as lacking intellectual substance and relying instead on bodily imagery, thereby reflecting broader cultural prejudices against female creativity. In contrast, Jane Austen—whose formal education was limited relative to that of her male contemporaries and siblings - employed irony as a narrative strategy to interrogate prevailing assumptions about women's intellectual inferiority, while also acknowledging the constraints imposed by her restricted access to classical training and scholarly resources. In this context, certain

literary genres, particularly the novel, proved comparatively more accessible to women than traditionally elite forms such as epic poetry, largely due to their reduced dependence on formal classical education.

Women writers were also subject to intensified moral scrutiny and cultural surveillance. Male critics frequently associated female authorship with impropriety, particularly when women engaged with themes involving sexuality, scandal, or political intrigue. Writers such as Eliza Haywood and Delariviere Manley, who explicitly addressed issues of sexual and political power, were often подвергались обвинениям in immorality and social transgression. In response to such stigmatization, many women authors resorted to anonymity or pseudonymous publication and avoided publicly visible literary platforms, such as drama, instead turning to prose fiction—especially the novel—as a relatively safer and more socially permissible form of expression. This pattern is evident in the cases of Frances Burney, whose father prohibited her from writing for the stage, as well as Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe, who similarly operated within the novelistic tradition.

Constraints on acceptable subject matter further structured women's literary production. Contemporary critical opinion often questioned women's ability to represent harsh social realities with authenticity. Nevertheless, works such as Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* directly challenged these ideological assumptions by depicting issues such as domestic abuse, psychological conflict, and illegitimacy. Gaskell's novel in particular encountered forms of symbolic censorship due to its treatment of unmarried motherhood, illustrating the moral limits imposed on female authorship. In addition, economic dependency and restrictive legal frameworks further limited women's literary agency: unmarried women frequently lacked the financial stability necessary for sustained writing, while married women were often deprived of independent contractual and economic rights, a condition later critically analyzed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.

The field of literary criticism itself was historically structured by male-dominated evaluative frameworks, which frequently imposed double standards on women's writing. To circumvent institutional prejudice, authors such as Charlotte Brontë and her sisters published under male pseudonyms (Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell), while Mary Ann Evans adopted the pen name George Eliot to secure critical legitimacy. Although overt institutional discrimination has diminished in contemporary scholarship, feminist criticism continues to reassess literary history by recovering marginalized women writers and re-evaluating canonical boundaries. As a result, medieval figures such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, along with early modern novelists including Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Mary Davys, are increasingly recognized for their contributions to literary development. Similarly,

genres historically associated with female readership, such as Gothic fiction and courtship narratives, are now more widely studied as complex forms engaging with social, psychological, and cultural issues. The expansion of publishing initiatives and digital archives has further facilitated the accessibility and reintegration of previously neglected women's texts into contemporary literary scholarship.

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