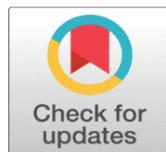
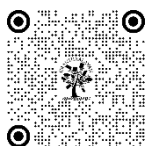


THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINIST THOUGHT IN ENGLISH LITERARY TRADITION

Nidhi Vyas ¹, Dr. Monika Gupta Aggarwal ²✉

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shri Guru Ram Rai University Dehradun, Uttarakhand

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shri Guru Ram Rai University Dehradun, Uttarakhand



Corresponding Author

Dr. Monika Gupta Aggarwal,
drmonikaguptaaggarwal@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article works on exploring the evolution of feminist thought in English literary tradition. It traces its historical trajectory from early writings to contemporary critiques. On the other hand, the article also explores various types of key developments across the first, second, and third waves of feminism. This is how it highlights the fact how each of these waves contributed to shaping the literary discourse as well as the portrayal of gender roles. The discussion of this study keeps the focus on various prominent texts. Some of these include *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This is how the discussion employs feminist literary criticism and historical contextualisation as the tool for analysis. The Key themes that are discussed include the transformation of female characters, the integration of intersectionality as well as the role of literature in the matter of resisting patriarchal norms. The findings that are gathered from this article showcase the continued relevance of feminist ideologies in modern literature. This is how it addresses various types of evolving challenges including globalization and digitalization. This specific study highlights the importance of feminist criticism in the matter of revealing diverse narratives as well as inspiring social change within and beyond literature.

Keywords: Feminist Thought, English Literary Tradition, Gender Roles, Intersectionality, Patriarchal Norms, Resistance and Agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist thought has contributed to a significant influence on the English literary tradition. It has shaped how gender roles as well as societal structures are portrayed in literature. The roots of feminist thoughts in English literature can be traced to the late 18th century, with the groundbreaking work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft (Uzomah and Uzomah 2024). This specific work has questioned the subjugation of women in patriarchal societies. English literature became a critical medium for addressing the inequalities in gender and championing the voice of women with the continuous evolution of feminist movements (Promee 2022).

It is very crucial to understand the feminist ideologies in literature. This is because feminist ideologies reveal how cultural, social as well as political forces work on shaping narratives. Literary works often mirror the changes within society (McArthur 2023). On the other hand, feminist literature works on highlighting the struggles and triumphs of women who seek for agency, equality as well as representation (Manasia 2023). These specific narratives challenge the

traditional dynamic of power as well as provide information about the lived experiences of women across different historical contexts.

This specific article clearly examines the evolution of feminist thought in English literature. The proper focus of this article is on key periods, influential works as well as the continually increasing emphasis on intersectionality. The discussion of this study properly demonstrates the transition from early feminist writings to contemporary critiques. This is how the study has examined how these specific ideas have reshaped the perspectives of the modern world.

The study argues on the fact that feminist literary thought has been very crucial in the matter of redefining gender discourse. This is how it offers a lens through which to critique societal norms as well as inspire progressive change within the environment. This article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of feminist literary tradition with the help of examining its historical roots as well as its relevance with the contemporary society.

1.1. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim

This article primarily aims to explore the development of feminist thought in English literary tradition as well as its impact on the matter of shaping contemporary perspectives on gender and society.

Objectives:

- To examine key historical periods and their contribution to feminist literary discourse.
- To analyse significant works of literature that embody feminist ideologies.
- To discuss the influence of feminist thought on modern English literature and critical theory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context English literature started dealing with early feminist thought during the period of Enlightenment (Talamante and Abang 2021). Popularly known work Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was one of the foundational texts of that time. According to Wollstonecraft, the limited opportunity for education for women contributed to the matter of inequality (Uzomah and Uzomah 2024). On the other hand, the author has also argued for equal opportunities in education and society. Chowdhury and Sofi (2024) identified the fact that the novels of Jane Austen including *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) significantly critiqued the roles of gender as well as economic dependency. This specific work clearly reflects the constraints that were faced by women of her time. As per Alkubaisi (2020), the works of Austen clearly demonstrate the importance of women's agency within the restrictive norms of society.

2.1. MAJOR WAVES OF FEMINISM

The first wave of feminism that occurred in the 19th to early 20th century kept the focus on suffrage as well as legal rights (Promee 2022). This specific wave has influenced different types of works including *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë. There are a number of authors including Rauf (2023) who demonstrated that *Jane Eyre* clearly portrays the quest of women for independence and equality. It also works on challenging Victorian ideals. As per Mohajan (2022), the second wave of feminism in English literature occurred in the 1960s–1980s. This wave shifted the proper attention to the rights of the workplace, reproductive freedoms as well as personal agency. This era has witnessed various types of popular works including Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) that helped in the matter of gaining prominence. As per Benahmed (2021), this specific work has clearly depicted mental health and patriarchal oppression. Third-wave feminism in English literature came from the 1990s onwards (Sen and Das 2021). This specific wave has embraced intersectionality. As per Khan and Khattak (2021), this fact was clearly reflected in the work *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys. This literature critiques colonialism alongside gender issues. Fig 1 provides a visual representation of the major waves of feminism in English literature. It also highlights the key aspects of the waves.

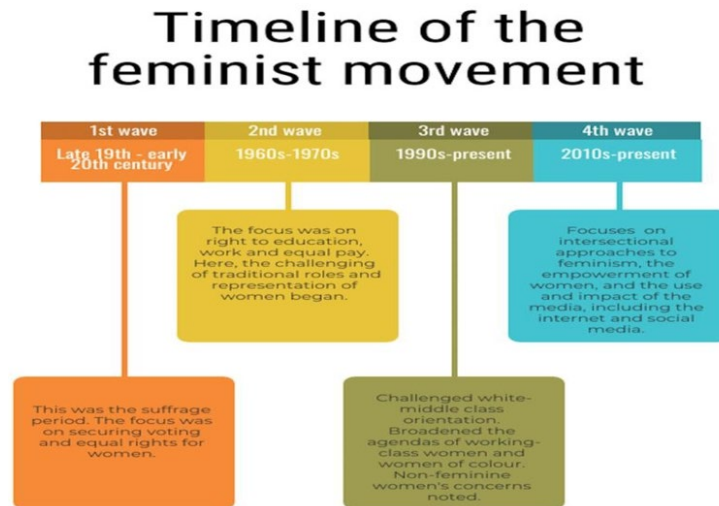


Figure 1 Major Waves of Feminism in English Literature

Source ResearchGate 2024

2.2. PROMINENT WORKS

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman which is a work by Wollstonecraft is often considered as a feminist manifesto (Bayram and Tezcan 2020). On the other hand, Brontë's Jane Eyre also broke new ground in the matter of portraying the self-determination of females. Some of the modern interpretations including Barui et al. (2023), demonstrates that Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper highly symbolises the psychological negative impacts of the inequality of gender. On the other hand, Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea reimagines the story of Bertha Mason (Tahmid 2024). This character provides a critique of racial as well as gender hierarchies.

2.3. CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES

According to Strauss (2023), the concept of intersectionality that was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw has contributed to reshaping the feminist literary analysis in recent years. There are various scholars including Hanson and Fletcher (2021) who indicated that intersectionality examines how race, class as well as sexuality intersect with gender. This specific approach has expanded the viewpoints of feminist critiques. This is how it has acknowledged diverse experiences as well as identities in different works including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's We Should All Be Feminists (2014) which highly advocates for inclusivity in feminist discourse (Emezi 2020).

3. ANALYSIS OF KEY THEMES

3.1. PORTRAYAL OF GENDER ROLES

The approach of portraying gender roles in English literature has gained a huge transformation over the period of time. Women were often depicted as passive figures in early literary works (Alola and Alola 2020). At that time the role of women was confined to domestic spaces. This specific fact clearly reflects the expectations of society. Desdemona is one of the prime examples that is portrayed in Shakespeare's Othello (1604) as obedient and sacrificial (Martello 2024). This character highly embodies various traditional feminine virtues. On the other hand, female characters began to assert independence as well as strength with the rapid growth of feminist thought in English literature. The character Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Brontë clearly represents a protagonist who directly challenges the norms of society with the help of seeking autonomy as well as self-respect (Fauzia 2021). This specific shift clearly highlights the beginning of a literary tradition where the voices and experiences take centre stage.

3.2. INTERSECTIONALITY

The inclusion of race, class, and sexuality has contributed to broadening its scope as well as relevance in feminist literature. The concept of intersectionality that was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw clearly showcases the fact how the approach of overlapping identities contributes to creating various unique experiences of oppression (Losleben and Musubika 2023). The *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys works on reimagining Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* (Walford 2022). It has addressed the intersection of colonialism and gender. On the other hand, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) clearly explores the complexities of race as well as identity (Alam 2022). *White Teeth* has highly illustrated the fact how various feminist themes extend beyond gender to deal with the broader social hierarchies. Scholars have mentioned that this specific integration has done a notable contribution to enriching the feminist literary discourse as well as making it more inclusive.

3.3. RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

It has been evident for a long time that many female authors in English literature have used their writings to resist patriarchal norms as well as advocate for the agency of women. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is a seminal text that argues for the creative freedom and financial independence of women (Krupa 2024). Woolf has noted the fact that it is very crucial for women to have their own space to achieve equality in intellectual pursuits. It is evident for both literal and metaphorical. On the other hand, the famous work *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood highly critiques the control of women's bodies and autonomy in dystopian societies (Hassan and Mansour 2024). This specific approach illustrates resistance against oppressive systems. These are some of the works that properly highlight how literature serves as a platform for challenging power dynamics.

3.4. IMPACT ON MODERN LITERATURE

Contemporary writers and genres have gathered higher influence from different types of feminist thoughts. Nowadays there are various works including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) that have worked on addressing global concerns of feminists (McCann 2021). Some of these concerns include identity and migration. The work of Ngozi highly reflects the interconnectedness among modern struggles. On the other hand, feminist ideologies have led to shaping the rise of speculative fiction. Various authors like N.K. Jemisin uses fantasy to explore themes of equality and empowerment (Vik 2023). These specific developments showcase how feminist literature continues to inspire new forms of storytelling as well as push the boundaries and challenge societal norms.



Figure 2 Key Themes in The Evolution of Feminist Thought in English Literary Tradition

Source Self-developed

4. METHODOLOGY

1) Approach

This study adopts a qualitative analysis of various selected literary works that span around different historical periods (Morgan 2022). This specific article clearly explores how these works help in the matter of addressing the factors of gender roles, resistance as well as intersectionality. It is done with the help of examining texts that properly reflect the evolution of various types of feminist thoughts.

2) Framework

The analysis highly follows the guidance of feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism examines the fact of how the aspects of gender influence the creation as well as the interpretation of literature. On the other hand, historical contextualisation properly complements this approach. It provides various types of information about the societal as well as the cultural factors that have contributed to reshaping these texts. This specific dual framework provides the opportunity for gaining a deeper understanding of the intention of the authors as well as the impacts of their work.

3) Scope

The texts that are chosen including *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* as well as *Wide Sargasso Sea* are pivotal to feminist discourse. These works highly represent some of the key moments in literary history. On the other hand, these works also showcase diverse perspectives on gender, race as well as class. These specific aspects lead to making the texts crucial for exploring the evolution of feminist ideologies in English literature.

5. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The analysis of key themes highly represents the significant progression of feminist ideologies in English literature. This progression reflects broader societal changes. Early literary works in English literature often portrayed women as passive figures (Gilbert and Gubar 2020). On the other hand, the thoughts of feminist writers gradually introduced various forms of empowered female protagonists who challenged the traditional roles of female in society. *Jane Eyre* (1847) is one of the prime examples that has marked a turning point (Highfield 2022). It is done with the help of presenting a character who sought independence as well as equality. The role of Jane Eyre embodies the ideals of early feminism.

The approach of implementing the aspects of intersectionality has added depth to feminist literary criticism. The framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights that there are various overlapping identities including race, class as well as sexuality that must be considered at the time of analyzing the experiences of women (Wahl 2021). Popular texts like *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *White Teeth* (2000) clearly illustrate how feminist literature has embraced these complexities while creating a narrative landscape that is more inclusive.

Feminist ideologies have also contributed to expanding the concept of resistance and agency. There are various works including *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) that clearly demonstrate how female authors have used literature to critique the norms of patriarchal society as well as advocated for change (Encyclopædia 2024). These texts provide a proper reflection of the struggles of their time. On the other hand, these have also inspired modern readers to challenge the existing societal norms.

It is also true that interpreting feminist thought in a modern context presents various types of challenges. There are various new perspectives including ecofeminism and postcolonial feminism that occur with the evolving feminist movements (Ottuh 2020). These perspectives pose the demand for re-revolutionizing traditional texts. Critics argue that classic works remain valuable but it is also important for contemporary analysis of various types of issues including globalization and technological impact on gender dynamics.

6. CONCLUSION

There is a crucial role that has been played by feminist thought in the matter of shaping the English literary tradition. Feminist thoughts have offered various types of powerful information about the struggles, agency as well as resilience of women. English literature has contributed to mirroring societal shifts with the help of the evolution of female characters and narratives. On the other hand, it has also acted as a medium that has the ability to challenge inequalities

in gender roles. The article has highlighted various types of key themes. Some of the themes include the transformation of gender roles, the inclusion of intersectionality as well as the significance of resistance and agency in feminist literature. The aspects of feminist literary criticism continue to reveal the complexity as well as the richness of the experiences of women from the early works including Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to various modern texts that clearly address global and intersectional issues.

These explorations of literature highly emphasize the relevance of feminist ideologies in the matter of understanding literature. On the other hand, there are various new challenges that arise in the process of interpreting feminist thought. This is particularly evident in addressing globalization, technology as well as diverse cultural contexts. These challenges occur due to the continuous evolution of society. Future studies in feminist literary criticism must need to embrace these changes. It is also crucial to expand the scope to include various types of contemporary perspectives including ecofeminism and digital feminism. Scholars can reveal various types of hidden narratives, inspire changes within society as well as make sure that literature remains a dynamic platform for equality and empowerment with the help of continuing to explore and critique literary works through a feminist lens. This fact clearly highlights the timeless significance of feminist thought in literature and beyond.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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