

## FEMINIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE

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*В статье рассматриваются проблемы современной феминистской литературной критики.*

**Ключевые слова:** феминизм, литературная критика, феминистское движение.  
*The article deals with the problems of modern feminist literary criticism.*

**Keywords:** feminism, feminist literary criticism, feminist movement.

Feminist literary criticism is often a political attack on other modes of criticism, and its social orientation moves beyond traditional literary criticism. Feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women, with their being relegated to a secondary position. Most feminists believe that traditional culture is a patriarchal culture, that is, organized in favour of the interests of men. Feminist literary critics try to explain how cultural imbalances are reflected in literary texts.

Adrienne Rich, a contemporary American poet, describes feminism as “the place where in the most natural, organic way subjectivity and politics have to come together” [4, p. 236]. Feminist literary critics protest against the exclusion of women from the literary canon. They focus upon the personal (such as diary literature), often exhibit a powerful political orientation (such as Marxist

feminists) and tend to redefine literary theory itself (in its concern with the psychosexual aspects of language). According to contemporary literary critics, feminism represents one of the most important social, economic, and aesthetic revolutions of modern times [7].

Feminist critics see the very act of speaking, of having a language, as a focus for studying women writers. Some of them study the very silence of women, which can be seen as “resistance to the dominant discourse” [2, p.148]. Examples might also be Emily Dickinson’s “slant truth”, or inner dialogues of such “quiet” characters as Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* or Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Ramsay* and *Lily Briscoe*.

Feminists examine the experiences of women from all races and classes and cultures, including Africa, America, Latin America, etc. Despite their diversity, feminist critics generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social and cultural contexts of literature and literary criticism. Elaine Showalter, one of the leading feminist critics in the United States, has identified three historical phases of women’s literary development: the “feminine” phase (1840–1880), during which women writers imitated the dominant tradition; the “feminist” phase (1880 – 1920), during which women advocated minority rights and protested; and the “female” phase (1920 – present) during which dependency on opposition is being replaced by a rediscovery of women’s texts.

Showalter attacks traditional literary history that reduces female writers to only a few who are “accepted”. She describes a women’s tradition in literature that is an “imaginative continuum [of] certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation” [6, p. 10]. Notwithstanding the contributions of such outstanding female authors as George Eliot, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in Showalter’s opinion feminist literary criticism has mostly developed since the beginning of the contemporary women’s movement, with Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Betty Friedan. These critics examined the female “self” as a cultural idea, concentrating on how male fears and anxieties were portrayed through female characters. These critics saw texts as models of power.

De Beauvoir established the fundamental idea of modern feminism by arguing that men writers define the human, not woman. Friedan demystified the dominant image of the happy American suburban housewife and mother in her book “*The Feminine Mystique*”. The book appeared among new women’s organizations, manifestos, protests, and publications that called for the enforcement of equal rights. Friedan also analyzed reductive images of women in American magazines.

Millett's "Sexual Politics" was the first widely read work of feminist literary criticism. The author's focus in this publication became a critique of ideology. Distinguishing between sex as biologically determined and gender as a psychological concept that refers to culturally acquired sexual identity, Millett wrote that "the essence of politics is power, and the most fundamental and pervasive concept of power in our society is male dominance" [5, p. 97]. She saw literature as a record of the collective consciousness of patriarchy. Her reading of D.H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet offered a powerful challenge to traditional social values of capitalism, violence against women, crude sexuality, and male power in general.

Elaine Showalter identifies four models of difference under discussion in feminist approach: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. The biological model is the most extreme, this may reduce women merely to bodies. The linguistic model posits women speaking men's language as a foreign tongue. If women continue to speak as men do when they enter discourse, whatever they say will be alienated. Showalter's psychoanalytic model identifies gender difference as the basis of the psyche, focusing on the relation of gender to the artistic process. Showalter's most important contribution has been to describe the cultural model that places feminist concerns in social contexts, including class, racial, national, and historical differences among women, and offering a collective experience that unites women over time and space – a "binding force" [6, p. 185].

At present, the most significant movements in feminist criticism, combining the diverse approaches fall into four main types: gender studies, Marxist studies, psychoanalytic studies, and minority studies. In all these areas, there has been a general shift from a negative attack on male writing about women towards women's definition of their identity in their own writing. Feminist criticism concentrates on female creativity, stylistics, themes, images, and literary traditions. This new emphasis began with the rediscovery of neglected or forgotten female writers and has grown into the attempt to redefine gender in literary studies.

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