

## Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: Visions and Re-Visions



### Literature

**Keywords:** feminist literary theory, criticism, poststructuralism, text, context, French theory, Anglo-American theory.

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reconsider some of the main aspects in the development of feminist literary theory and criticism. In the introductory part of the paper we will remind the readers of one of the key moments in its development – the moment when Barthes declared the death of the author, and caused the further shaping in the development of feminist literary theory and criticism. After that, the focus will be on the last two decades of the twentieth century (important to the development of this theory, when, according to Moi (2009), the interest of critics in women and creativity, women and writing, women and the creation of art, became intense) when the greatest development within the Anglo-American and French context in the study of this theory occurred. In conclusion, we will revisit this theory's relationship to literature, concentrating on texts from the anthologies and collections of papers published about this issue, with special focus on the *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (2006). This book offers us a referent framework for the analysis of this relationship, which is the focus of this short and unpretentious paper.

## 1. Introduction

In the lecture that she held about feminist literary theory and criticism, T. Moi analyses one of the phases in its development: she maps the start of the interdisciplinary development of this theory, i.e. the turning away from its primary interest in the literary and from focus at the relationship between “women and aesthetics, women and creativity” (Moi, 2009). The central question that comes out of Moi's lecture is why feminist theorists stopped writing about women and writing, when the possibility of reading the silence and conflict in the text leads to an opening up of productive ways of studying the politics of language, authority and power (Johnson, 1995). Johnson recalls the American poet Adrienne Rich, who traced the silence in her collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1979), because these and other works attempt to read the suppressed or hidden messages that female writing had encoded, as they require a reading strategy which goes beyond the obvious intentions or superficial meanings. In Moi's lecture the accent is placed on the time marked by Barthes' “The Death of the Author” (1967), on Derrida's efforts to prove that literary texts are only texts, without any reference to the speaking subject and on the objections of female theorists who, under the influence of poststructuralist thought (just as N. Miller had done), wrote that not dealing with female writers means dancing to the beat of sexist tradition (Moi, 2009). Other authors, like Mary Eagleton, remind us that neither Barthes nor Foucault dealt with the issue of gender: for both, the author is ‘he’ and the particular situation of women authors does not enter into their focus of interest. After listing the key arguments which Moi also mentions, Eagleton (1996) further analyses this issue by focusing on texts by N. Miller and M. Biriotti, whose basic ideas can be summarised in the following way: a) throughout history,

women writers have not had the same attitude towards the issue of identity, institutions and creativity; b) due to the feminist revision of literary history, the adequacy of the masculine to stand in place of the universal is radically called into question; c) after the death of the author was announced, an examination of the literary canon was initiated; d) killing the author means disrupting the power of the white male and opening up the possibility for marginal groups; e) until this question was raised feminism acted in tandem with poststructuralist and postmodernist thought, as these three critical perspectives brought into question the authority of the author, since they have a subversive influence on the canonical view of the history of literature.

## 2. Visions, Re-Visions

In *Sexual/Textual Politics* Moi (2002) also maps the different contexts through which feminist theory and criticism developed during the last decades of the twentieth century. She mentions American feminists and their explicit political commitment, while stating that the French women had their attitude towards current political events, but that it was quite vague, and that they were ahistoric and idealistic. They initiated the concepts of *fémininité* and *l'écriture féminine*, highlighted as being problematic, which A.R. Jones (1981) writes about in her text "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*". Jones states that these concepts were criticised as being essentialist and attacked as being fatal to constructive political action. In her text she initiates the analysis of several more issues which provoked different reactions within academia, and which arose out of the French context: can the body be a source of self-knowledge?; does female sexuality exist independent of social experiences or in spite of them?; do women experience their bodies exclusively or essentialistically – outside the demanding acculturation which was analysed by French women and also in other countries?

Building on the doubts Jones wrote about in her article, we inevitably have to mention H. Cixous and her writing style, inspired by the Derridean, in which through the phonetic inscription of the female body, its pulsing and flowing (*Ars*, 2010), she moved to opening up to the difference of the other, which led her to a synthesis of poetic and academic discourse. It also led her to the conclusion that in her writing, theory does not come beforehand, to inspire, but is above all a consequence of the text. Theory does not provide an extra ethical-political structure, but is a concession that the poet makes in accepting educational responsibility (*Ars*, 2010). In her books she calls upon women to write their own history outside the narrative of inequality and oppression, which represents itself in language and on bodies and theorises the writing of women in the context of the physical act of writing, reminding us that writing is created through bodies (*Ars*, 2010). Her theory is characterised as feminist because, as she stated in one interview, patriarchy is a cultural and historical context with relationships of power, which are real conditions that do not exist separate from aesthetics and practice.

When clarifying her attitude towards feminism, L. Irigaray stated that she did not know what was meant by the term "feminist" because this word is used in many ways, so she feels limited when she is called a "feminist" (*Ars*, 2010). Another reason why she emphasises this is because it is tedious to classify women and men who are more or less connected to movements to

liberate women into those who are feminists and those who are not. For her it is important to allow a dual subjectivity (Ars, 2010). Quoting examples of limitations which hinder the subject, she sums up her attitude towards genres which she resists because traditionally women have expressed themselves as artists rather than as cold and logical, and she does not want to take part in the restraint of ways of expression. She resists genres and deems the most important the opening up of new possibilities for thought. In a similar way, J. Kristeva's work is placed within the framework of feminist studies, as one of the sources of its strength and frustration, because of its originality in the consideration of reality (Ars, 2010). B. Schippers (2011) explains that the conflicting approaches to Kristeva's texts are very much in line with her ambivalent attitude towards feminism in general, and come from the determining of her significance within the achievements of feminist theory and criticism, of the reluctance which she expressed because of the incorporation of certain aspects of her work into feminine perspectives, and of the rejection of feminism as totalitarian. The fact is that in Kristeva's bibliography there is a section in which she deals with issues that are relevant to feminist thought, which Schippers analyses in detail in her book *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought*. In researching Kristeva's attitude towards feminist thought and the antithetical interpretations that followed it, she maps the reactions of the part of the academic public that wrote about Kristeva's antifeminist and misogynistic views, and the section (whose main representative is considered to be L. Zarelli) that considered her voice one of the most gifted voices being aired in the modern age in the realm of feminism. "Women's Time", in which three phases of feminist development are described, is mentioned as the most significant text that has been published in this area of her study. Summarising her views of the aforementioned "Women's Time" K. Oliver wrote that in the first phase there was a tendency towards universal equality; in the second, there was a search for a unique female language, while in the third phase there was a tendency towards a new imagining of their identity and distinctness and the relationship between the two (Ars, 2010).

Ambivalence within feminist theory is not inherent only in the French context. M.G. Dice described the model of heterogeneity and plurality characterised by this theory as a field of constant questioning, exclusively argumentative questioning, which does not promise to resolve itself in a pragmatic consensus or to converge in a shared conceptual basis (Warhol and Herndl, 1997), while S. Lanser (2011) describes it as a literary and material practice reminiscent of a collage: it is another issue as to whether the pieces of this collage fit together or not, but the model whereby all feminist theorists and critics agree about everything and equally contribute to the whole is rather utopian. She concludes that in removing the differences between them, we would remove the possibility of real change and that what is important is to welcome the productive tension between these metaphorical pieces which make up the whole. Thus in the context of Anglo-American development of this issue one question provoked different reactions, but it was Gilbert and Gubar (2002) who initiated its more serious development in their study about literary imagination in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The question was what does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of the literary authority are patriarchal? Gilbert and Gubar (2002) believe this is a basic question which feminist criticism needs to answer and in their research they started from the thesis along which the writers themselves worked, and then prove or

disprove the achievements of their predecessors. The tensions and anxieties which the writers feel when they face not only the achievements of their predecessors but also the tradition of the genre and style which they inherit, is the other starting point for their research into this issue, and at this point, which they themselves state in one of the parts of this study, their position tallies with the position of J.H. Miller, according to which a literary text stands on the echoes, allusions, guests and ghosts which belonged to certain earlier texts (Ars, 2010). In their research, importance is given to the position of H. Bloom, who, applying Freudian structures to literary genealogy, postulated that the dynamics of literary history come from the artist's "anxiety of influence", or the fear that the works of one's predecessors have a substantial priority over one's writing. In fact, they wrote that Bloom's paradigm of a consistent historical relationship between literary artists is presented through the father-son relationship. He explains that the poet must engage in an heroic struggle with his "predecessor" because, being included in an Oedipal literary struggle, the son can become a poet inasmuch as he, in a certain way, enfeebles his "poetic father" (Ars, 2010). In conclusion it is stated that Bloom's model of literary history is patriarchal, and so the questions that they suggest for further study in this context are the following: when talking about tradition, where does the female poet fit in? does she have a tendency to destroy her ancestors, her "forefather" or "foremother"? what if there are no models for her, if she has no predecessors? does she have a muse, and if so, what gender is it?

In the Anglo-American context, in the same chronological framework, E. Showalter (1985) builds upon the work of Gilbert and Gubar, according to which, in literature written by women, feminine values penetrate into the masculine systems within which they are contained and undermine them. Her *gynocritics* is linked to feminist research into disciplines like history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc., because these are areas which have contributed to the development of a hypothesis about female subculture. According to Showalter (1985), if we do not understand the frameworks of female subculture, we can misinterpret the themes and structure of literature which women have written, when drawing out necessary links with tradition. The purpose of women's literature is to discover a new world, which Showalter presented in greater detail through the classification of three phases, which B. Dojčinović-Nešić in her text about gynocritics (2005) summarises as follows: the *phase of imitation* of the prevailing model of the dominant tradition; the *phase of protest* against these standards and values; and the *phase of defence* of the rights and values of the minority. Following Showalter's work, revisions of the hidden sides of women's literary tradition were initiated, from which we can more specifically point to the way in which K. Mullin (2006) determined the chronological framework of female subculture through her analysis of female creativity in the age of modernism as the art of a particular historical period, which, according to the official histories written before the opening of the canon, was marked by Joyce, Pound and Eliot. Concluding that the aesthetic radicalism of modernism developed alongside the political radicalism of the "first wave" of feminism, Mullin asks questions about the relationship between modernism and feminism and the place that belonged to women in the framework of the new literary movement. In this mapping, she starts with V. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in which the exclusion of women from literary culture is examined, and explains how women writers were prevented from entering libraries, how

their enrolment at universities was contested, and how they were denied the cultural space and material means necessary for creative work. Mullin also points to hostile critics in texts such as, for example, *The Feminist Note in Prose* by W.L. Courtney from 1904, in which he attacked novels about the “New Woman” (which was about family relations and “gender problems”), because in such a novel they had not managed to understand what the neutrality of the artistic mind is (Ars, 2010). Writing about the male standard of aesthetic value, Mullin also draws our attention to 1909 when F.T. Marinetti mentioned the struggle between the sexes, as well as Pound, who tried to exclude women from the modernist journals he was connected with, upon which male modernist insistence on the “male-ness” of the new form of artistic practice can be more easily understood. However, Mullin writes that women were tolerated on the periphery of modernism, as editors and publishers and concludes that the fact that such women are often called the “midwives of modernism” speaks of the sexual policy of the role which they had in this period (Ars, 2010).

### 3. Conclusion

Whatever doubts we had about the existence/non-existence of interest among feminist theoreticians/critics in literary text at the turn of the new century, the fact remains, as Ellen Rooney (2006) wrote, that feminism has had a dramatic influence on the way we read, teach and evaluate literary texts. Returning to the general characteristic of this theory and criticism which, according to T. Eagleton (1983), constituted perhaps the most popular of all new approaches to literature, because it revised the canon of literature and broke out of its restrictive limits, we will agree that this is a complex intellectual concept which has fundamentally examined the assumptions and methods of the literary studies. We will conclude this review of the feminist model of heterogeneity and plurality with the words of S. Gubar who, in response to the question of the author of this text about what all should be incorporated into this issue at the turn of the new century, listed the following: a) feminists who discover women writers in their own literary tradition; b) who continue to criticise male culture; c) who are active in the area of popular culture; d) who analyse transnational cultural relationships and interconnectedness; e) feminists and studies of ethnicity; f) feminists and peace studies; g) feminists and their engagement with global capitalism, etc. Gubar’s statement is reminiscent of E. Rooney’s (2006) introduction to the previously mentioned *Cambridge Companion*, in which she wrote how the effort to lay down a definition, genealogy or history of feminist literary theory, for educational reasons or from political clarity, threatens to simplify something that is very complex.

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