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FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM : A NEW
LOOK AT OLD THINGS

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REPORT ON THE PROGRESS OF WORK

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PHYSICS DEPARTMENT

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'Here was the point on which Miss Brooke would be found wanting, not withstanding her undeniable beauty. She did not look at things from the proper feminine angle'.

'Do trust me, said Dorothea I could have no other motive than truth and justice I have very little to do'

----- Middlemarch, 1871*

'Though history itself has only grudgingly accommodated the aspirations of women, literary history has moved through a series of emancipations and expanding fields of conquest'

----- Communities of Women**

* Middlemarch George Eliot, Penguin English Library 1977, pp.122, 820.

** Communities of Women : an idea in fiction. Nina Auerbach, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.

Feminist Literary Criticism : a new
look at old things

Before one launches into a definition of feminist literary criticism the question that perhaps needs to be answered is 'Why feminist literary criticism?' For critics have looked at literature from so many points of view that one might well feel that literature has been studied in all its dimensions. The following incident reveals how far one is from the truth

A literary scholar, Marcia Holly decided to publish a collection of essays dealing with women characters in fiction who portrayed self-reliance, independence, strength and courage. She advertised in newsletters and personally wrote to 150 women teaching literature courses, asking for essays showing female patterns of strength. Instead of the expected deluge she only received essays dealing with untruths about women in literature. That was when she began to wonder : how true are the truths presented in literature?

Although, opinions and ideologies differ, and different writers focus on different things, uphold different values, the presentation of women has remained consistent through various generation of writers from all cultures. Given the personal beliefs of each writer, in literature, a critic may analyse the way a truth is presented but not look for 'truth'. So, although one may not expect from literature the authenticity of history and sociology, it is also true that literature reflects life and also moulds the values and aesthetics of its readers. The role of ideology in literature therefore becomes an important question.

Most books, War and Peace, Oliver Twist and even Gone With the Wind are supposed to be the author's depiction of his ^{/or her} society. Yet a close look at these books show a pattern emerging in their presentation of women. These novels of realism turn out to be highly unrealistic in their presentation of women. Men are brave, hardworking, honest/corrupt, intelligent and whether morally good or bad are nevertheless defined through the work they do; women on the other hand are defined solely vis a vis their relationship with men. Her goodness or badness is therefore related to her faithfulness, obedience and loyalty to a man. Her positive qualities have always been those that attract men - beauty charm, etc.

Feminist criticism questions the confinement of women characters to what one might call her body - i.e. to being attractive, sexual and/or maternal. It also questions the non-representation of those women who in the later eighteenth and nineteenth and twentieth centuries worked at new jobs, pioneered women's education, employment and suffrage. It also looks at works by women writers and discovers a different pattern of truth emerging there. In the process feminist criticism brings out the role of ideology in mediating reality.

Fictional women, most of the time have no relation or resemblance to real women. Individual women have at different times voiced their dissatisfaction with this. Or they have sought to create new women who they felt would represent the truth. This paper documents their efforts and traces the genre of feminist literary criticism from its beginnings to the present age. Today when feminists are

categorized according to their historical perspective under labels such as 'radical feminists' 'social feminists' 'socialist feminists' it is worth looking at the emergence of these various attitudes at different times. My contention is that all of these attitudes or perspectives have cropped up at different times, and at different places. Also individual feminists have sometimes held ideas or arrived at conclusions that would combine or bridge these categories. For feminist theories have much to do with the times in which they are formulated besides being related to the particular experience of the theorist herself.

As this paper traces the growth of feminist literary theory it will also consider its corresponding theme in feminism itself. Because this paper deals with English literature and the literary criticism of English literature the author will refer mainly to the British feminist movement. However, since literary criticism was greatly affected by some writers from the sixties' American movement and because after the sixties American and British feminists seemed to be fighting for several common issues some references will be made to feminist writings from America.

As women came to literature through a different route than men, as latecomers to education and employment, women found in existing literature nothing that really told ^{and} her story. As she took over the new medium in her own hands/ gave it new depth, she therefore also raised questions about the validity of that literature. Today with open talk about women's separateness in men~~str~~atration and childbirth it is easier to talk of a separate female psyche without being derogatory. But in earlier centuries when women's banishment to child^{rearing} and cooking seemed natural enough, the main

thrust of feminism had been towards showing women's intellectual equality with men. An intelligent woman, even if such a specimen was recognized was not a good woman. For women had to think with their hearts. The feminine was the emotional, the masculine was the intellectual. Therefore when women aspired towards anything that required intellect the reprisal was immediate. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s is a protest against this repression of the female-self.

The Origin of the Genre

The study of women's literature and a feminist approach to literature in general began in the 1960s, with a widespread redefinition of womanhood. The debate on women had of course been going on for a longer time.¹ It was in the 1960s, that the women's liberation movement became more than just an agitation. It became a part of general awareness. Although the initial reaction from the establishment had been in terms of cartoons and jokes it soon became obvious that like the dual nature of the Woman Question - political and personal, it would touch lives at both levels. Thus personal issues such as housework and contraception and wider ones such as employment and legislation were both touched by feminism. Needless to say, at both levels the awareness was to create changes.² Women's studies was born out of that change. In both England and America the new discipline entered the academic world and departments were set up.

The setting up of independent publishing facilities by activists of the movement and the increasing number of women's study groups brought about a new approach to most things. Feminist literary criticism grew out of these activities.

Inspired by the movement feminists looked to the past and works by women from earlier centuries began to be reprinted - a task that is now undertaken even by university presses and general publishing houses. Yet the resistance still exerts itself. For just as the feminist demand for equal employment opportunities displace many men from jobs, so too feminist literary criticism invalidates what men try to pass off as the universal. Anger, tolerance, suspicion, doubt, mockery encounter the feminist scholar. Be it a male dominated department, or a publishing house the reception is much the same. It is only today that post-Women's Lib writers can voice these experiences in the prefaces to their works.³ How many more must simply have been suppressed altogether from valuable research.

After battling with handicaps such as housework and children, women writers and critics thus face outright dismissal. Thus was one of the greater novelists, Charlotte Bronte discouraged by the Poet Laureate of England. Robert Southey must have voiced the entire establishment when he wrote to her, 'The daydreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to produce a distempered state of mind . . . literature cannot be the business of a woman's life'.⁴ Just how important a part of women's life literature is, is today amply demonstrated by the incisive critiques of feminist scholars.

Nature and Scope of Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism encounters prejudices even today. With absolute confidence masculine ideas, values and feelings are passed off as universal. Feminist literary criticism points out that they are invalid for half the human

race. Similarly universal qualities such as valour or gentleness are divided into masculine and feminine qualities. This has serious implications not only for literature and art, but for the entire social context of which that art is a product. Given the function of literature as a reflector and at the same time a moulder of social values it becomes an important vehicle for transmitting sexist myths across times and cultures.

Part of the task of feminist literary criticism, at least in its initial stages is to act as a kind of guard. A lot of feminist criticism therefore concerns itself with identifying the sexual stereotypes and myths in the images, characters and plots in literature. It is to this criticism that we owe our knowledge of the fact that most literatures from ancient times to the present age work with only two basic stereotypes of women - the virgin and the whore. In modern American fiction they find expression as the 'sweet loving angel' and the clever scheming 'bitch'.

Apart from this function, it is feminist literary criticism again which has gone into literature by women and come up with startling revelations. For even when pandering to popular stereotypes, woman's own story, own point of view crept into the text as a kind of undercurrent.

In both these functions, the feminist critic has to deal on the one hand with the text itself and on the other with the entire social and biographical background of the text. Thus when feminist criticism scrutinizes the text in terms of the various factors responsible for its existence it takes on the nature of a sociological enquiry. The social background, the political conditions, the economic status of

the women of the time and the existing literary scene are all brought to bear upon the text.

One early example of this comprehensive approach to literature is Virginia Woolf's. Three Guineas, A Room of One's Own and her short critical essays on women writers are about the writer's predicament as woman. In her essays on other writers she takes into account their lives. Just as in A Room she talks of a hypothetical sister of Shakespeare (who would meet with shame and death if she tried to pursue a career like her brother) in her essays we get insights into people like Dorothy Wordsworth, that talented and little known companion and sister of the poet Wordsworth. Again and again we find her bringing the author's biography to bear upon the author's works. Apart from being an individual style of her's this kind of approach set an early direction for feminist criticism.

Besides identifying stereotypes and in-depth reading of women's literature by high lighting background material, feminist perspectives open up new possibilities in the works of authors such as Hardy, Gissing or Meredith. A recent survey has looked a new at the heroines of these authors that reveal a strange mixture of stereotyped images and feminist awareness.⁵ Yet another feminist perspective has pointed to the sociological implications of stories written by D.~~X~~. Lawrence and Norman Mailer.⁶ Both these authors were popular, sensational and awe-inspiring. Both were looked upon as the heroes of modern sexuality. Lawrence's Lady Chatterjee's Lover and other novels saw in the human female a purely biological creature, an object and receptacle for the male whose sexual urges were described in pseudo-abstract terminology, whose main trait was aggressiveness and who was nearly always described in

terms of a wild animal. It is when this male confronts, subjugates and pacifies a female that he becomes the Lawrence here covered with glory. This was according to him the basis of life.

Norman Mailer writing from post World War America, depicted in detail the world of war, a world of exclusively male violence (The Naked And The Dead) and then moved to the relationship between the sexes. This too is described in terms of war. Thus An American Dream turns out to be a nightmare as its hero - war-hero cum Ivy League hero with good looks and brilliance - an archetypal American male of fiction, murders his wife and within minutes is engaged in a hatefilled, violent assault upon the maid. Sexism, racism and every form of superior feeling marks this man as he moves from one to the other, referring to the women as 'bitches'. Mailer was an immensely popular writer sought by the media to comment upon everything. He became like Lawrence a kind of cult hero. It was Millet who in the late seventies pointed out that what society was doing was in fact applauding a Hitler-like assault on women. Sexual Politics made its point where women were concerned. It made women readers aware of the kind of thinking that feeds the depiction of women in fiction. Hemingway did ^{this} too with his glamourization of male pursuits such as hunting, deep-sea fishing, fighting and bull fighting. These were supposed to be the occupations of 'real men'. The women are there as foils. Either angels of simplicity and innocence to highlight the hero's world of violence as in For Whom The Bell Tolls and Farewell to Arms, or totally absent from a scene which is supposed to depict the plight of all humanity (The Old Man And The Sea) or as nagging shrewish 'bitches' (Hemingway's term) who slowly eat up their men (the Nick Adams stories). These novels won him the Nobel Prize. Feminist

critic Elaine Showalter's observation points to the terrible wrong that women suffer in literature and art.

'Too many literary abstractions which claim to be universal have in fact described only male perceptions, experiences and options, and have falsified the social and personal contexts in which literature is produced and consumed.

Women writers on the other hand have expressed in their fiction attitudes and values that reveal a different pattern of thinking.

Critical Attitudes Among Women Authors

However, political^{or} polemical feminist literary criticism may sound, its relevance and authenticity are best reinforced by woman writers themselves. In most fictional works written by women can be found the author's awareness of her gender. This at times is part of the story or style of the novel. Most of the eighteenth century novels, for instance were about women whose emotions towards the hero were described in slow detail. Her entire consciousness seemed to centre round the hero and she underwent a series of joys and heartaches till it all ended happily. Fanny Burney's novels are perhaps the best examples. Women novelists tended to show events from the woman's point of view.⁸ That is, in terms of the effect of things on the heroine. A love situation when depicted by a man tended to dwell much more on the outer appearance of the heroine and on actions and incidents rather than only feeling. One explanation offered for this is that given the confinement inside the home women tended to think and feel much more than men.

In novels where the author does not openly depict things from the woman's point of view, one finds her intruding almost unconsciously as it were to side up for her heroine and this happens more when the heroine is an unconventional character. Thus George Eliot is mildly ironic when the father of Maggie Tulliver, comments on his little daughter's intelligence - 'An ever cute (acute, i.e. intelligent)' woman's no better nor a long tailed sheep⁹. Sadly and realistically enough Maggie is confined to the dullness of her home while the family pays to send her slow-witted brother Tom to boarding school. This was after all true for almost all women of the age. In Middlemarch the author's presence is more direct. Here the heroine Dorothea Brooke, beautiful but wanting to do something great¹⁰ perform some great action, ties herself on a misdirected impulse to an ageing scholar. Later when after his death she marries the much younger nephew and finds contentment in working to improve the lot of her poor tenants, society finds her a peculiar sort. George Eliot comments,

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of a young and noble impulse struggling amid the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.¹⁰

The author here is obviously conscious of the limitations of being an intelligent girl. It is almost as if she is straining to make her heroines do what she herself dared. Intellectual, scholar, translator and editor, George Eliot lived for about two decades with a man without being married to him.

If her status as an intellectual gave her the insulation from gossip and scandal, as author she knew perhaps, that a heroine like herself would not be accepted. The limits she could go to was to depict women whose minds dominated more than their beauty. To show their confusions and contradictions regarding their love towards more than one man took enough courage in the nineteenth century. That these women needed a vocation, that their minds were straining towards some fruitful intellectual pursuit is left unresolved. For the age did not have any answers. These heroines are the earliest literary expressions of the creative female consciousness.

Earlier than George Eliot is the fiction of Mary Wollstonecraft where one finds a revolutionary call for a different kind of fictional heroine. Long before she wrote her famous Vindication of the Rights of Women Wollstonecraft expressed dissatisfaction with the portrayal of women in literature. She wrote two novels where the heroines are shown to have definite intellectual leanings rather than emotional or domestic. In one of her novels is exposed the dark legal system under which a husband could imprison or shut up his wife in a lunatic asylum without any difficulty. The other novel Mary is about the heroine's disenchantment with love and marriage. In her Advertisement to this novel Wollstonecraft wrote,

In delineating the Heroine of this fiction the author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed. This woman is neither a Clarissa, Lady G - nor a Sophie

In an artless tale, the mind of a woman who has thinking powers is displayed. The female organs have been thought too weak for this arduous employment . . . in a fiction such a being may be allowed to exist, whose grandeur

is derived from the operation of its own faculties, not subjugated to opinion but drawn by the individual from the original source.¹¹

Here then was a critic who evaluated literature from her own experience as a woman. Clearly something was wrong with the heroines of Fielding, Richardson, Rousseau^u and others. As far back as the eighteenth century then we have women finding in literature a continuous pattern of untruths about themselves. Wollstonecraft's heroine is an avid reader but here again the author warns the reader that she too was selective. Mary, 'would frequently study authors whose works are addressed to the understanding'.¹² But Wollstonecraft's kind of fiction was rare. Unpolished and raw with anger and misery she comes through as one of those honest voices that have questioned an established tradition.

The Attitude to Women Authors

The majority of women authors in the eighteenth and on to the next century found it more pragmatic to pander to prevalent stereotypes. Not surprising, because many women at this time were earning a livelihood from writing. John Stuart Mill, too had noticed the phenomenon and summed it up thus,

It is but of yesterday that women have either been qualified by literary accomplishments, or permitted by society to tell anything to the general public. As yet, very few of them dare tell anything, which men, on whom their literary success depend are unwilling to hear. Let us remember, under what impediments, a woman who is brought up to think, custom and opinion her sovereign

rule, attempts to express in books anything drawn from the depths of her own nature. The greater part of what women write about women is mere psychopancy to men¹³

If women wrote to please men, she also wrote in a complaisant way because of the mental conditioning that did not allow her to see in her fate something that her instinct did not accept. In fact, it was such women who formed really, the vast majority. Mill wrote of literary women as being,

Unfortunately ... artificial products, (that) their sentiments are compounded of a small element of individual observation and consciousness, and very large one of acquired associations Women who read, much more women who write are in the existing constitution of things a contradiction and disturbing element.¹⁴

Mill had perhaps hit the nail on the head. Sympathetic and able to understand the mental constitution of women he perceived in women's writing the strain of untruth. But Mill was far from representative of the general attitude towards women writers. Most of the time women authors encountered responses to their personalities rather than their works. It was their personal lives, their physical appearance their marital status that excited the reader's curiosity. The more unorthodox such an author's private life the more censure for her books. George Eliot, a victim of Victorian morality could overcome the prejudice only through the moderate tone of her work. She broke taboos in personal life but her heroines were not allowed to do so. They struggle against their own needs and finally give in to social expectations. So much so that even when she wrote an article on Mary Wollstonecraft she is tactful and ingratiating. Wollstone-

craft's ^{Vindication of} The Rights of Women had been lying in obscurity for fifty years when George Eliot's article tried to rescue it. Yet we find that she was cajoling and hinting when she had just cause to speak with frankness and anger by pandering to the male stereotype of femininity in order that her thoughts on a question of the deepest concern to women might receive a hearing.¹⁵

It seems therefore, that much of what John Stuart Mill thought was 'psychophrancy to men' in women's writing was really a strategy. A woman writer's very own literary device. In Victorian times when prejudice against the intellectual woman was at its highest the device seems to have been frequently used. As author's women have had to employ different techniques depending upon the climate of their audience.

The Changing Style of Women Authors

The cajoling style, however was not always deliberate. A legacy of reprisals had affected the self-confidence of many intelligent writers. When The Second Sex appeared in 1949 in its original French version, it seemed to be a bold and much needed book on women by a woman. Simone de Beauvoir explored both facts and myths about womanhood besides considering the condition of women in her time. Yet the first line of the Introduction to the book sounded so much like the traditional apology offered by every woman writer: "For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on women. The subject is ^{so} irritating Enough ink has been spilled over it."¹⁶ After such lines begins the most voluminous work on the subject of women. Hesitation has been the mark of women writers and critics at all times.

The feminist movement of the sixties has to some extent changed this. It has legitimized, as it were, women's studies. Authors and critics are now more assertive than apologetic. Instead of disguising their identities by using male pseudonyms like George Eliot or Ellis Bell and excessively feminine sounding pseudonyms like Grace Greenwood or Fairy Fern they now not only use their own names and write about women as women but also call their presses by names such as VIRAGO.¹⁷ The names of some feminist journals today speak of this new development. -- 'Ms.' Magazine and Womanspeak are assertive 'Spare Rib' an ironical name and 'Mama Collective' a sure and self-confident name for a group that publishes women's studies.

Today as both women's literature as well as feminist criticism have come a long way, attempts have been made to define the new criticism. Some formulations have been made or arrived at through discussions group thinking and seminars. This is an essential feature of feminist critical activity. Since the literary criticism is conducted out of the awareness generated by the feminist movement itself, the themes of some works by women authors as well as the critical approaches undertaken by them find correspondence in the issues that feminism has concerned itself with. Feminist literary studies have corresponded with women's studies in other disciplines as well as the manifestoes and ideologies that have cropped out of the movement. In literature however, as will be discussed below, feminism has shown itself much earlier though it is due to the critical awareness brought about by the 60's feminism that one perceives these instances of feminism in literature.

Literature and Feminism : The Woman Writer, the Feminist Critic and the Fictional Heroine :

In her book Communities of Women Nina Auerbach^u asserts that

'Though history itself has only grudgingly accommodated the aspirations of women, literary history has moved through a series of emancipations and expanding fields of conquests'.

One of the earliest instances of women's organization exists in Aristophanes's comedy Lysistrata where the women of the locality gang up in protest, shut themselves away and thus pressurise the men to concede to their demands. It is a kind of non-cooperation agitation by wives. An agitation which perhaps did not take place in real life for history shows us no evidence of it. Written by a man, a writer of bawdy Greek comedies when such farces were part of the religious and cultural rituals of a society, it shows an awareness not only of the popularity of the sexes but also of the kind of strength that women could draw from organized protest. Fiction has also provided other instances of feminist organizations in the form of Utopias where only women exist and where things are just fine. In its fictional form these organizations or communities are often projections of the inner conflicts and wish fulfilment of women. They also reflect the awareness of women's different destiny. Another form of women's community are fictional sister-pairs. Diametrically opposite in nature, one conforming to and the other straining away from the norm they serve to show the split that exists at some level or the other in most women. Through their mutual discussions, understanding and fellow

feeling they establish a female community where the masculine world does not obtrude. George Eliot's Dorothea and Celia in Middlemarch, ~~Forster~~ ^{Fraser's} Margaret and Helen in Howards End, Lawrence's Ursula and Gudrun (Women in Love) are some examples. While Celia and Margaret do not disturb the male world in any way their sisters cannot breathe within its framework. Margaret is aware of the discrepancies of the masculine world but seeks to resolve them not by open attack like her sister but by 'methods of the harem' i.e. by coaxing and cajoling for justice. A third representative of the female community is the lone fighter - the heroine who stands alone, who lives out the consequences of her convictions in solitude. Her consciousness, though it sets her apart from society yet ties her to other women as she alone carries out the protest against their common fate. Wellstonecraft's heroines and Jane Eyre are early examples. Woolf's Lily Briscoe (To The Lighthouse) and Doris Lessing's Anna (Golden Notebook) and Martha Quest (Children of Violence) all personify this type.

The kind of analysis offered in the paragraph above is an instance of the kind of feminist literary criticism that started in the seventies. It was only in the seventies with the feminist movement having set the process of questioning established ideas in motion that critics looked to literature in order to identify stereotypes as well as feminist figures. When feminists turned to literary criticism they had a pioneer in Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir's analysis of authors in The Second Sex showed the blind spot in acclaimed literatures of the world. Citing examples she reinforced her thesis - the objectification of woman as the 'other' by culture and society. This was long before the Women Liberation Movement of the sixties.

Later when Kate Millet wrote from the sixties' generation of feminists her analytical method was somewhat similar to de Beauvoir's in that it sought to identify the treatment of women in the text. Millet's authors were a more blatant bunch than those selected for de Beauvoir's analysis. And the passages cited at the beginning of Sexual Politics from Mailer and Miller (both Popular American writers) in Millet's book showed the brutality that was perpetuated upon women in the name of heroism and virility. This began an exploration of women in literature and other fields. The sixties and seventies saw anthropological, sociological and linguistic studies on women.¹⁹

'Virgin', 'Mother', 'Fallen Woman', it was discovered were female stereotypes present in most cultures. The Greek myths of Alice, Clytemnestra and Penelope and the Biblical ones of Madonna, Eve, Delilah, fairy tale Cinderellas and Snow Whites rescued by brave princes and lived happily ever after marriage were the popular patterns in all literatures. In the English literary tradition, writers with some degree of feminist awareness could dispense with one stereotype only by pandering to another. Thus George Eliot's beautiful impetuous rebellious heroines who in the end come back to their traditional destiny. Thomas Hardy's heroines whose fates question the double moral standards but who are painted as sensuous creatures. Thus, for all deviant heroines who either die or get married and settle for domesticity. A few exceptions exist in our own time foremost of whom is Anna, the heroine of Lessing's Golden Notebook. She sets about systematically breaking the myths of womanhood. Going from role to role she finds each one insufficient or false to her needs. She is simultaneously -

girl friend, author, wife, mother, communist party worker, landlady, woman in love, friend of another woman - and yet she cannot find herself completely in any of these roles. As she confronts a world full of discord where feminism could easily be yet another 'ism' she undergoes a completely breakdown. But this was written not long before the sixties movement. It takes for granted certain attitudes and awarenesses later related to feminism.

For the most part, women writers have rarely flouted tradition. Many Wollstonecraft remained a solitary figure for several centuries. Most have insisted upon dissociation from feminist groups or ideologies including Doris Lessing in our own time. It could be that, they did not want to be identified with this or that ideology, that they wanted to retain their individuality and flexibility as artists. It could be that they did not want their work to be treated as so much propaganda. But most of all perhaps because their success depends on the patronage and support of the male critical and academic establishment. But, as feminists have rightly pointed out, the strain of upholding the status quo is visible in their writings - in abrupt endings, inconsistent character development, fluctuations in style and an over all cautiousness.

Developments in Feminist Literary Theory : The Pioneers

Unlike the authors who wrote in isolation the feminist critic developed her keen sense of perception from a kind of group awareness. And it is because of this feature that feminist literary criticism can be more outspoken than literature. The earliest attempts at feminist literary analysis in our own age has as pointed out earlier been made

by Simone de Beauvoir. Now as far as a perception of something lacking in literature goes, Wollstonecraft revealed it in the seventeenth century. Earlier than that is the English dramatist Mrs. Aphra Behn. To explain her critique would need a brief introduction of the author herself. She was a singular woman who wrote successful plays at a time when Jenson held sway over the English stage.²⁰ Behn, a widow settled down to writing after a life of exceptional adventures. She spied for her country, ^{and} is claimed to have shot a man, and was imprisoned. She took the stage by storm and each of her plays ran to full houses. In all of them she sought to puncture the prevalent ideas of the masculine. And in her prefaces she addressed the audience directly, shaming them for their hypocritical attitudes towards women writers. She defended women writing for a career as well as the quality of women's writings. In the Preface to The Dutch Lover she wrote 'affectation has always had a greater share in the action and discourse of men than truth and judgement have'. This was the age of the dandy and the fop much popularized in our own time by the novels of Georgette Meyer and Barbara Cartland. The male members of the family gobbled all the resources in educating themselves at Greek, hunting, fencing and stylish clothes by depriving the women.²¹ These were the men who were members of court, who inherited positions in the country's top administrative levels and who were consequently the patrons of and judges of art and literature. Behn thus hit out not only at the wrongs done to women writers but at the sickness of the entire social world. It is interesting to note that the earliest feminist literary critique has been closely linked to a social criticism too.

This is what distinguishes it from the general preoccupation with structure and style criticism that seems to operate in a space outside social context. In fact feminist criticism is so much a part of looking in a different way at society itself that it is itself a part of a social process. For if the feminist movement is linked to an entire rethinking in all areas, feminist literary criticism too turns on its head the prevalent approaches to literature.

Feminist Literary Theory and Female Aesthetic :

Though, as a genre, feminist literary criticism is still new and lacks a sound theoretical base.²² Elaine Showalter's article of 1979,²³ is an important step towards defining a poetic. She divides feminist criticism into two categories - 'feminist critique' which is a historically grounded inquiry probing the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena, and 'gynocritics' which considers the woman as writer, the psycho dynamics of female creativity linguistics and the problem of a female language, individual or collective female literary career. According to Showalter, feminist criticism has theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics whereas gynocritics is experimental, self-contained, imaginative and connected to other modes of feminist research.

However her argument that the feminist critique is male oriented does not carry much weight. It is not correct to say that such an approach merely shows what men think about women and that 'the temporal and intellectual investment one makes in such a process increases resistance to questioning it'.²⁴ For in order to identify certain stereotypes as male

created feminist critics would have to draw upon that part of their experience, imagination and intellect that does not find assurance within the prescribed code of conduct.

Feminist critics try not to fit women writers into the linear absolutes of male literary history. For as already stated before, women came to be writers through a different route than men. Faced with double standards both in life and literature, deprived of an education till recent times, economically dependent and confined to child-bearing and housework, the experiences that feed a woman's writing have got to be different from a man's. Her value system and ideas on heroism, duty and other things are also bound to be different. Part of her responses would be conditioned by what men want of her and part will be about what she actually feels. It is perhaps from the latter that feminist literature is born. As far as criticism is concerned however segregation of women's writing as different could also have an adverse effect. The walls would be strengthened. Treated as an exclusive group women writers could be doomed to a marginal existence. Especially today, when women have entered all occupations hitherto open only to men, such distinctions seem a little overstretched. The feminist literary critic therefore has to begin with a new definition of what is universal and look into literature with that. Samuel Beckett for instance is a writer who cannot be compartmentalized for his gender. It was Virginia Woolf who wrote that in order to produce great literature, a writer must finish with anger and indignation. A writer must write from an inner source of calm. This is the calm that Anna the artist, heroine of Lessing's Golden Notebook tries to reach. Along with recognition of their distinct identity women writers would also need to ingest and assimilate certain qualities from the general tradition of literature.

When Leves had attacked Charlotte Bronte for attempting to write, her reply had been, 'I wish you did not think me a woman I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and what you consider elegant and charming in femininity'. If this holds true for most writers, then it would be meaningless to trace a separate literary tradition. Yet women's writing does in some ways have a separate tradition. The earliest women wrote in secret. Before women wrote fiction they penned down their thoughts in letters, diaries and autobiographies. The Medieval Ages saw quite a few sermon writers who were women. In the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women wrote poems for private circulation among friends. Needless to say, prior to the eighteenth century writing was an occupation mainly of leisured women. Much of what these solitary women wrote were therefore of a very private nature. Because of her circumstances it was impossible for a woman to write things about an entire people as the epic writers did, or to write of heroic actions. In women's writing can be found the qualities of interior monologue, of quiet self-exploration. A lot of the writing also bemoaned the woman writer's lot as the anthology by Goulianos shows.²⁵

Today, there seems to be a trend within feminism to overplay this aspect of women's writing. There is at times an unnecessary emphasis on biological distinctions. A section of feminist art and literature has tended to concern itself exclusively with the themes of childbirth and housework. These works make their point about the exploitation of women but do not really have the makings of great art. It is true that women writers have been capable of depicting domestic realism much more skilfully than men but in this age there is surely more to a woman's life (a woman writer has to be

educated and generally comes from the middle classes) than mere housework. An obsessive concern with domestic issues and images may therefore run counter to what the earlier writers had tried to do. For one of the first demands of domestically confined women was for the opening of opportunities to learn and earn. That was Mary Wollstonecraft's demand and Virginia Woolf's too. They wanted women to step out of the narrow confines of the house.

But since most of the literature written by women upto the nineteenth century concerned itself with the home, the personal or domestic novel has got identified with women. Read mainly by women, this kind of fiction offered profitable business to publishers as well as writers : In Jane Austen's hands it found new expression as she depicted assertive women who function successfully within the parameters of a well-mannered social setting.

The feminist novel, or the more assertive trend in women's fiction began with Mary Wollstonecraft. It continued through the works of the Bronte sisters and later in some of Woolf's fiction. It brought women out of the domestic scene. In one novel Woolstonecraft exposes the exploitation of woman within marriage and in the other her heroine is unattracted to marriage and for the most part reads and travels abroad with another female friend. Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights depicts a wild and passionate woman in a kind of non-man's-land where the laws of society do not operate. Out among the moors her heroine seems to find full expression of her nature. Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre again is about a girl who has grown up in an orphanage and who goes to work as a governess. Apart from this break away from domesticity is the very volatile temperament of these heroines. It would

not be wrong to say that till today women's fiction is written between the trends marked out by Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, that is women in a domestic setting and women outside it.

Virginia Woolf whose criticism can be categorized under Showalter's definition of 'gynocritique' (i.e. dealing with the nature of woman's creativity the problem of a female language, etc.) uses in her fiction a mixture of both strains. It is clear that Woolf did not ban domesticity for her heroines but wanted to make it a matter of voluntary choice. Once the choice is made, the women who choose it seem to find full flowering within the home and its concerns. Mrs. Dalloway who finds a kind of creative satisfaction in bringing people together for her parties, who is alive to people however small or unimportant they might be, in an example. Mrs. Ramsay, one of the two central female characters in To The Lighthouse spends her life playing the hostess to large numbers of guests. She is a mother who is acutely responsive to the needs of each of her eight children and tries successfully to knit diverse temperaments into harmony. On the other hand is Lily Briscoe, the impoverished, unattractive spinster artist who tries to seek in art the same harmony that Mrs. Ramsay achieves in life. Ultimately Lily succeeds, mainly by invoking the spirit of Mrs. Ramsay to establish contact with those around her. It is as if in this novel Woolf was trying to resolve the dilemma between career and domesticity that had stifled the abilities and aspirations of so many women. Ultimately, it would seem that the artist/career woman would need to understand in depth the instincts of the female mother. Woolf's domestic women are given a new dimension so that they seem more like benevolent matriarchs instilling order rather than simpering housewives.

The feminine is here extended to include the strong as well as the gentle.

In her literary criticism, Woolf looks beyond the text, to the personality of the writer. Her critical essays on women writers are therefore more like portraits of the artist as woman. This feature of her criticism gives the feminist dimension to her essays. Here literature is evaluated in relation to the authors life. 'When the middle class woman took to writing she naturally wrote novels If Jane Austen suffered in any way for her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her', Woolf wrote in A Room of One's Own.²⁶ Woolf shows a peculiar contradiction in her feminist critique. She is feminist to the extent that she highlighted the socio-economic factors that shaped a woman's destiny as writer. A Room of One's Own is about how social and financial conditions make or break a writer. Yet in the same book she writes, 'A writer has to kill all her anger, indignation and sense of injustice if she is to write well'. In other words she wants writers to be indifferent to everything that shapes their writing! She advocates calmness in writers. Yet her very successful A Room of One's Own is anything but calm. It is filled with the feelings of a wronged person. If women are to write out of the depths of their experience anger would have to be a part of that experience. In Woolf's fiction one finds the anger modulated into irony. The tone of her fiction is ^mmild compared to the protests she makes against women's situation in nonfictional writings. And no doubt the toning down of anger gives a certain polish to her writing. Mary Wollstonecraft's raw anger mars her fiction. It makes the writing clumsy. Her two novels do not make easy reading and are read today by scholars only. They seem to have been

written to prove a point rather than present a fictional situation. But not everyone can successfully tone down indignation. George Eliot's writing therefore, becomes jerky in terms of plot construction. She dares not allow her heroines to finish what she makes them begin. Her article on ^{the} fire brand feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft too therefore becomes cautious when it could have been hard-hitting.

The sixties brought the Mary Wollstonecraft school of criticism to the fore. Now it was not necessary to cajole the reader into sympathy for women. Rather go all out to break all stereotypes and myths and confront the reader with the feminist viewpoint or even the female point of view. The writers - Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Mariel Spark, Nina Bayden, and the critics - Ellen Moers, Patricia Meyers Spacks, Linda Nochlin, Elaine Showalter, combined to give to literature a feminist angle.

After the historically grounded inquiries into literature begun in the sixties, the need for a separate feminine aesthetic was felt. Nina Auerbach^u wrote that feminist or at least feminine values would 'inevitably assert themselves in women's literature and criticism, and undermine the masculine systems which contain them', and that 'Women have imaginatively engaged the myths of the Amazons and the fantasies of a separate female society in genres from Victorian poetry to contemporary science fiction.'²⁷ As part of forming a literary aesthetic, critics have looked into the style and structure of works by women. This becomes specially relevant in the case of Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf all of whom try to speak through a new language structure. The need for a new structure and

language for women had been felt by several writers. Woolf declares the existing language unfit for women's use and divided consciousness into male and female. She perceived women writing amidst 'a lack of tradition, a scarcity and inadequacy of tools'. 'The sentence itself, she wrote was not suited for women.'²⁸ But all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands, another reason, perhaps, why she wrote novels.²⁹ Today however the female consciousness has overtaken not only the novel, but also poetry and theatre. The post-sixties saw experimentation in feminist art forms too. The items displayed at 'Feminists' an exhibition of art exchanges by women through the post, contain common household objects amidst which women spend most of their lives. It gave special attention to those first few years after the children are born when women are completely tied down, both personally, socially and biologically to the life of the child. When an educated woman who may have been fairly active outside finds herself virtually imprisoned indoors for several years, doing back breaking labourious tasks day after day the affect can be traumatic. These are precious years for a career. It is not surprising therefore that 'Feminists' held up the brutal truths about Women's lives - soiled nappies and greasy saucepans. These are images which haunt women's writing. Sylvia Plath wrote of these things in her poems, so did Anne Sexton who visualized the woman sitting alone in an untidy home at midmorning munching left overs with cold tea after the husband and children have left for work or school. Adrienne Reich expressed it in two verses -

if I'm lonely
it must be the loneliness
Of waking first, of breathing
dawn's first cold breath on the city
of being the one awake
in a house wrapped in sleep
and if they ask me my identity
what can I say but
I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
the letters of my name are written under the lids
of the newborn child.³⁰

With the connection being made between women's oppression and achievements, between the actual condition of women and its expression in literature it was becoming more and more impossible for the academic to reject feminist criticism. The existence and validity of female consciousness in literature was being established by studies in other disciplines too.

Female literary aesthetics had its support in the social sciences. Sociologists, psychologists, historians had gone to literature for information. Now literary critics could use their data to establish female aesthetics. There came out studies in stylistics, technique and the psychodynamics of creativity.

The psychology of female creativity is explored in Patricia Meyers Spacks's The Female Imagination. Using the autobiographical writings of various artistes - dancers, painters and writers Spacks explored the process of artistic creativity via a *vis* biological reproduction or the creation of life.³¹ Juliet Mitchell reviewing works of Freud, Reich and Laing found that, 'psychoanalytical theory is both less adequate on femininity and psychosis than it is on masculinity and neuroses.'³² Mitchell also traced their influences in the thinking of feminists from Simone de Beauvoir to Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet. Three years after Mitchell's book, a doctoral thesis on 'Madness and Sexual Politics' in the Feminist Novel,³³ discovered a startling pattern running through the novels of three women novelists from three different times Charlotte Bronte, Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing have created heroines who are juxtaposed to a mad person. Excepting Mrs. Dalloway the other two novels - Jane Eyre and Four Gated City - contain the heroine and the mad woman within the same house. Feminist critics point out that the mad woman is an extension of the heroine herself. Since the extended personality cannot live with the insanities of the masculine world she retreats into the basement or the attic. Here she turns away from insanities such as war and sexual oppression. Another thesis was put forward by the University of Berkeley, California.³⁴

Stylistics forms the mainstay of Linda Shindberg Katz's Rhetorical Analysis of Virginia Woolf's Feminist Tracts and Novels.³⁵ Alan Swingwoods 'Structure and Ideology' in the ⁿNovels of Doris Lessing though not a feminist critique is a demonstration of scientific analysis being applied to an author, who is strongly feminist despite her denials.

Today with structuralist as well as sociological studies in literature, literature as a subject seems to have shed some of the prejudices surrounding it. It has in this age often been regarded as a soft subject, fanciful and entertaining but not quite relevant. This perhaps happened during the war years when Humanities or the Arts suddenly dropped in rating. Juliet Mitchell, one of the scholars and feminists from the Women's Liberation Generation in England writes of the state of women and literature in those years, 'A large number of early women's liberationists were students in Arts Faculties'. Studying more for its own sake, rather than for a job, they formed an intellectual elite. Moreover their degrees in the Humanities seldom equipped them for jobs. According to Mitchell two things happened simultaneously that affected both literary criticism and women's consciousness during the sixties. The advent of technology and World War II - both drew more and more arts students (female) into jobs and job-oriented courses. This created in them an awareness of themselves as a labour force besides at the same time disillusioning them with the Ivory tower arts courses they had attended, as well as the dull, monotonous technicalities they were learning. Besides with the Cold War and the Sputnik era the Humanities disciplines suddenly appeared irrelevant. As science became a weapon and a field of international competition, the sciences got a masculine aura with more money being pumped into research laboratories and science departments. Northrop Frye notes this as 'the dismal sexual symbology surrounding humanities'.³⁶ A symbology that, according to him, says that the sciences, especially the physical sciences are rugged, aggressive, out in the world, doing things and so symbologically male. The literatures are female because they are narcissistic intuitive,

fanciful, staying at home and making the home beautiful but not doing anything serious. Frye, in his turn postulated a systematic critical inquiry thus giving literature a scientific structure, and thus also endowing it with status in a masculine academic system.³⁷

Showalter observes that these new sciences of the text based on computers, linguistics, structuralism etc., have created a class system among literary critics. The 'higher' class, the scientific critic spends more time on producing terminology, seminars, specialists, institutes and theories rather than on the text.³⁸

The 'lower' class of critics are concerned with the humanistic problems of content and interpretation. While scientific criticism struggles to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism is willing to assert (in the title of a recent anthology) The Authority of Experience.³⁹

However, today feminist criticism uses both approaches and in doing so has enriched the texts it studies. Besides criticism, women's literature in our own times has tried to explore the various complications experienced by the woman author.

Female Creativity :

Anna, heroine of the Golden Notebook is a writer who cannot write anymore, as she discovers the false assumptions, romanticism and blindness that had gone into her first novel. Moreover, the success of this novel along with offers to film it, show her that her audience has entirely missed the point she had been struggling to make. As she tries again and again to go over the experiences of her youth,

some of which had gone into the novel, she is aware that her hindsight often tends to get blurred by the falsehoods of nostalgia. When she tries to write again she attempts to trace her own thought process as realistically as possible. But now she finds that not only would this make outrageous reading but that it also lacked the focus and cohesiveness that is required of a work of art. Lessing's novel thus continuously tears down the walls between life and art till one finds that for her artist heroine, art is expected to achieve much more than history, philosophy or psychology. It is a novel about the creative woman trying to put into her art all that she knows and feels, and in the process discovering unexplored depths of the self.

Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar shows the difference between the public life and the inner life of its heroine who is a journalist. This young woman goes through the experiences of a typical American co-ed and finds her own instincts at no point matching the norms. Finally released out of a mental home she finds the two halves of the bell-jar hovering over her head, ready at any point to snap the tenuous link with society and sanity which only hypocrisy and play-acting can keep alive. Much of Plath's poetry incidentally is filled with domestic images from the kitchen and child rearing. We know from them that she crept out of bed early at dawn to write while the children are still sleeping. It was on one such occasion that she entered the kitchen and gassed herself to death.

Anne Sexton another young female poet killed herself too. Among her poems was one written to Plath. From the testimony of a contemporary one finds how agonizing it could be for an educated woman to live within the framework of marriage

Married after college, Anne Stevenson finds herself uprooted from her own environment, and into stations where her husband is posted. The days are spent with the baby and the evening devoted to drinks and gossip with the wives of his colleagues. After some valiant attempts at writing - with baby and bottle propped between herself and the paper, she breaks down. The husband is hurt and shocked. When after a divorce she comes back to university and finds herself surrounded by discontended contemporaries she is able to realize that for any educated woman with a baby to follow in the wake of an enterprising husband is depressing. It brings a sense of failure, of collapse.⁴⁰ Here at University she finds that both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton had gone mad and committed suicide. It was here that Stevenson writes her epic poem about three generations of women. Today research is underlining the relation between madness and creativity in women writers.⁴¹ After surmounting the obstacles of lack of time and place to write, very often what she writes can be shared and understood by women only.

Marginalization

It is not surprising therefore that the earliest women's studies departments were opened at the initiative of women themselves.⁴² Showalter^e writes that today in the United States where women's studies programmes offer degree options in nearly three hundred colleges and universities there has been a counter demand to resist the pressure to assimilate. And anyway female writers are always assigned subcategory status. As a critic recently put it - scholars are accustomed to dividing artistic products into "serious" and "popular" art. A cynic would say that a work of literature is "serious" if it appeals to the tastes of the academician

making the classification, and 'popular' if it is read by the non-academic public. Since there are so few women among those entitled to make such distinctions, it is not surprising that so few works by female authors are regarded as serious literatures.⁴³

She goes on to quote Showalter, who noting the near absence of female authors from college English syllabi, writes :

Women students will therefore perceive that literature, as it is selected to be taught, confirms what everything else in the society tells them : that the masculine viewpoint is considered normative and the feminine viewpoint divergent. In the literary curriculum the woman writer is by definition "minor", recommended perhaps, but not required; likely to be a recluse, childless, or even mad, and yet lacking the phosphorescent glamour of the doomed male artist. In short, a woman studying English literature is also studying a different culture to which she must bring⁴⁴ all the adaptability of the anthropologist.

The student of literature therefore ends up deciding in the manner Virginia Woolf deplored, 'This is an important book ... because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room.'

New Trends in Women's Writing

Today, feminist criticism also holds up the new images of women that depict them in a different light. In the Second Sex de Beauvoir wrote, 'To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her, let her have her independent existence and she will continue more or less to exist for him also :

mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other'.⁴⁵ Lessing's women fit this description. In her five volume novel series The Children of Violence, she records the makings of this new woman from childhood to youth and maturity when she is entrusted with the care of survivors from nuclear war. These will be beginners of a new race of humanity. Lessing's concern with atomic annihilation is a reflection of a modern phenomenon where women elevate their role of mother to preserver of the human race itself. It is interesting to note that women form the majority of anti-nuclear protesters and are now fighting to ban the bomb with the same spirit that they had once exhibited during the suffrage campaign. It is a full circle. For now the man made cult of motherhood has gone out of the home into the street to fight the man-made world of war and violence. This is one of the new images of women in modern fiction.

Muriel Spark's women sometimes take on the qualities normally attributed to men - love of power and political machinations. The Abbess of Creve is about the scheming that goes on among men for power. Money plays an important role here. On the other hand is Miss Jean Brodie a school teacher who in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie takes on a monumental stature. These women are tinged with negative qualities.

Feminist Criticism has also focussed on the hero in women's fiction. In the earliest stories - religious myths - the male appeared as God. In the Christian tradition the world was created and man saved by the Father and the Son. In the home the man continued to derive from this image as he was also the formal head of the family despite women's role in the breadwinning process. With industrialization and women's

entry into the labour market this position was slowly and subtly altered. At first women did not earn enough to be independent. Secondly they were not even entitled to their earnings. But the process of change was on and women's exploitation at the factory and at home only spurred it on. In women's fiction the erosion of the traditional ideal of manhood can be traced as early as the seventeenth century. Aphra Behn, probably the first professional writer among women broke down the 'heroic' as a concept. George Eliot's male characters were quite antithetical to the traditional ideal. Compared to the fiery women characters they appear lacking in intelligence, will power as well as moral power. Charlotte Bronte in Jane Eyre has her hero blinded and impoverished before he is finally accepted by the heroine. Woolf's Mr. Ramsay is a ruthless dissection and caricature of the conventional father image. Based on her own father, Woolf wrote that this portrayal purged her of many feelings towards him. She wrote in her diary 'His life would have totally ended mine'. Lessing's male characters are shadowy figures who exist mainly to heighten the brilliance of the women they are opposed to. Mary MacCarthy's The Group is about the idealism and fellow-feeling among a group of young female graduates. As they enter the world of men, marriage and jobs each rocks the environment she inhabits. That they stick by each other and flock together seven years after leaving college, from different parts of the world speaks of the bond and the island they have created. At the cruel death of a group member her unfeeling husband is put in his place and she is claimed back to the fold even in death.

In general literature, the 'heroic' or the 'hero' dominated till the later part of the eighteenth century. With the Romantic Movement in English Poetry, the features of the hero underwent a total change. He stopped being a warrior, and became instead a thinker/poet/artist. The features of the artist hero suited women very well as she was confined to thoughts rather than actions. And her solitude as well as leisure (among the upper classes) had made her turn to art and writing. By tradition women were considered 'fanciful' (imaginative) and now this epithet could become an asset.

Thus it was in the nineteenth century that the woman writer could depict her own struggle as an artist. Although she had grappled with the creative spirit in herself ever since she had taken up the pen, her heroines had to exist at a different level of struggle. The discontented, directionless, striving heroines of George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Bronte preempt the artist heroine. Till women could write she could not express a great part of herself. In the artist heroine it is this part that is played up by her creator. Thus it is that in the twentieth century, strengthened in her convictions of herself as a woman and as artist, helped by education, awareness and mass agitations the woman writer created artist heroines who could even claim a separate language for themselves.

Feminist criticism has in its search for a **history**, unearthed writings by women of all ages which had hitherto been completely ignored. The sixties saw the publication of several anthologies by unknown women. Women's literary history went beyond the well known novelists to the diaries and letters of women in the sixteenth century, to sermons

written by women in the Medieval Ages and to records of household activities by women of an early Medieval period. These formed 'the experience of the mass' behind the single voice of an Eliot or Woolf for 'master pieces are not solitary births'.⁴⁵

Not only women's literature but all the intellectual activity that was started off by the feminist movement has contributed to the development of feminist literary criticism. In different places feminists focussed on different issues and with research feminism seemed to turn many established economic and psychological theories upside down.

Feminist Theory :

Though several observers tend to regard the sixties movement as essentially different from the nineteenth century struggle, it was with the suffrage campaign that women first organized themselves at a mass level over half-the world. About a hundred years ago, no woman could own property, let alone vote.⁴⁷ The Rights of Woman asked for equality of education in 1792. Wollstonecraft's was the first female voice strong and persuasive enough to be heard at all.

The history of feminism in Europe and America is relevant for understanding the movement of the sixties in the West. We find that prior to the sixties' struggle, feminist agitations were concentrated around winning a few privileges rather than an over-all change in the system. Simone de Beauvoir's account of the birth of feminism in the nineteenth century⁴⁸ shows how all over Europe and America different political systems and governments saw the same phenomenon - women rising in organized revolt. Women won the vote when her

actual social condition as second class citizen was unchanged. Women factory workers worked for longer hours and less pay. Their income was not their own but their husbands. When during the second World War she was needed to replace the men in factories she was elevated to 'partner' rank only to be sent home after the war with the advice that she was more needed there.⁴⁹ The change in women's condition in socialist Russia is again a product of a general economic policy that recognizes woman's potential as a productive force. Productive, i.e. both in terms of work and workers.

It was through the latter process that the socialist concept of Women's Liberation emerged. In fact de Beauvoir's analyses in certain portions of her book, stems strictly from the standpoint of historical materialism. She used the economist's tools to trace the history of feminism. As a school, socialist feminism has several adherents. Kate Millet's definition of patriarchy and her analysis of literature⁵⁰ is also mainly concerned with the capitalist treatment of woman as consumer item, although Millet is not a socialist.

The sixties saw the rise of radical feminism, which took a broader view of oppression and saw its roots not in the economic base of society but on the oldest distinction - the sexual difference between male and female. Some radical feminists - foremost among them ~~Sch~~^v Schläsmith Firestone aimed at changing biology itself through science and technology. She visualized the human embryo growing inside some mechanical contraption rather than in a woman's body. Today, with test-tube fertilization and surrogate mothers, science at least seems to be moving towards that idea. More than this

however, the radical feminists ideas were related to birth control and also making the process of childbirth a little more bearable.⁵¹ These feminists were quick to realize that motherhood was not necessarily the blessing that it was made out to be. Neither was it woman's sacred duty. The movement saw more women opting for childlessness than ever before. Such an option had been unthinkable before.

With the emergence of this new phase in feminist history came an era of diversity in women's studies. It was realized that there could be no single simplistic solution to women's problems. There were contradictions and confusions within the female psyche itself, and women's oppression could not be pin-pointed to a single consistent source. Whereas pamphlets and manifestoes of the movement tended to veer between several viewpoints or focussed on isolated, single issues, reviews of the movement often tried to make connections and resolve differences. These reviews, written by women were different from earlier essays on women's condition written by Mill, Marx, Engels or Bebel.⁵² Here the analysis was being done by the oppressed themselves. By the 1960s, feminists had come a long way from Wollstonecraft's solitary, angry outburst. Now feminist writings were backed by scholarship and team-work.

As the shape of the movement changed from a unified broad based struggle to numerous smaller groups, certain positions became more and more revolutionary. The small group encouraged the exploration of the experience of personal oppression by its members. The new solidarity of 'sisterhood' offered them a security; a base from which they could operate. Thus it was the small groups that actually set about problem solving for individual cases of oppression. In a system where

the law and law enforcing machinery is made up of indifferent often hostile men, it is these groups that have served to fight cases of rape, harassment at work, job discrimination and domestic drudgery.

At an opposite pole from 'socialist feminism', the radical feminists located the oppression of women to a basic attitude in men. One pamphlet stated :

We recognize that we are engaged in a power struggle with men while we realise that the liberation of women will ultimately mean the liberation of men from their destructive role as oppressor, we have no illusion that men will welcome this liberation without a struggle.... We believe that the purpose of male chauvinism is primarily to obtain psychological ego satisfaction, and only secondarily does this manifest itself in economic relationships Man hurts woman out of a psychological need for a sense of power.⁵³

The sixties feminist found the theories developed by the socialist thinkers, inadequate partly because they did not posit any solution even theoretically. As Mitchell put it, the woman question is only a subsidiary to discussion of the family and private property, in the works of Marx and Engels. Bebel, although he located the oppression of women to a stage beyond the family's origin nevertheless stressed on her physical inferiority and maternal function as making her economically dependent on man. 'To this point', she writes, 'the liberation of women remains an adjunct to socialist theory not structurally integrated into it.'⁵⁴

Women's studies and theories really grew out of small groups. As they edited journals and magazines, artistic activity in the form of poems, plays, paintings, novels thrived. So did literary criticism and analytical articles of a sociological nature. The small group was part of the solution itself at times as they helped to spread awareness and instill confidence in a hundred different to spread awareness and instill confidence in a hundred different homes and environments through their members. As research and studies were undertaken alongwith demonstrations and protests, these groups were the first base for feminist studies.⁵⁵ Many of the Bibles of the Women's Liberation Movement were written by women associated with a small group around the sixties. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique⁵⁶ marked a turning point in the American movement. It was a myth shatterer, the starter for many more books on the subject. This was followed by The Longest Revolution by Juliet Mitchell in England. By the nineteen seventies, compilations of feminist articles, essays and pamphlets produced in the past decade began to appear because, by this time, women and social observers outside the movement recognized the whirlwind decade of the sixties as a point of change. (Student Unrest, youth groups, black militancy, World Peace advocates, and Third World struggles were some of the other phenomenon of that period.) As feminists took stock of themselves and began looking back to the nineteenth eighteenth and seventeenth centuries for their roots, reprints of older works were published⁵⁷ (See p.26), and early exponents like Mill and Wollstonecraft were canonized by this generation.

Cezaine Greer's The Female Dungeon takes an anarchist ultra individualistic stand, while Sheila Rowbotham's Hidden From History and Woman's Consciousness, Man's World are more objective in tone. Rowbotham put down very succinctly the exact ramifications of woman's oppression in society and her revolt at various points in history.

Today the student of feminist history as well as the feminist literary critic can perceive the shades and differences between different feminist writers as well as between different manifestations of the movement. In England for instance, the women's movement is seen more as an offshoot of the suffragette movement a few decades earlier. For soon after the vote, which came as a kind of prize after the effort British women put into the nation's preparations for war, women found themselves fired from their jobs. It was only natural that a new wave of fury was generated. Having suffered from cruel and blatant discrimination on the job front, having been let down by the government in a total way, (as the government backed day-care nurseries for the children of working mothers was withdrawn simultaneously) it was not surprising that the British feminists continued to focus on equality on the intellectual and employment spheres.

It was a long tradition from Mollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf that again touched their lives.⁵⁸ Also the English feminist movement right from the days of the Suffragette struggle was essentially a middle class movement. Its leading figures were educated and financially comfortable. Christabel Pankhurst too, although interacting with working class women felt contented when the vote was finally granted to a selective section of women.

In the United States on the other hand, the women's movement arose because of the isolation that women felt within the other movements of the time - civil rights, Black rights, student movement. Their awareness of oppression was therefore not so much as a State controlled thing but as a person to person, individual sexual relationship affair. Moreover, the American white women saw herself not as the most oppressed but as better off than the Black male or female. Till today therefore the white feminists and black feminists are not in total agreement over their aims. The black woman was the American counter-part of the English lower class woman. Her rights were often overlooked. Moreover politically the black woman felt more in common with the black man rather than the white woman. Secondly, the intense consumer culture that prevailed in the States saw woman's commercialization on a larger and more intense scale. The 'sex-goddess' was more of an American phenomenon.

Perhaps the Marilyn Monroe cult sums up the age. The American feminist movement therefore seems more focussed on changes in sexual relationships rather than equality of job and education. Erica Jong, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer all typify this attitude. So great was the pressure on women that on Monroe's suicide a young woman wrote,

.... Her death has been called a Hollywood tragedy, an American tragedy, even a tragedy of civilization. I think its a feminine tragedy. Her life is frightening to women. Simply because she's so familiar to us, she sums up all the contradictions of a particular feminine stereotype. She reminds us of the death wish that's hidden in our narcissism, the dark other face of glamour.

In her public image Marilyn is everything we're told we want to be; in her private life she's everything we fear we probably are.⁵⁹

Feminist criticism today has to incorporate both aspects of the problem. In looking at the works of literature, not only has it got to identify sexism but it has also to define and explore the racist, and class-based assumptions behind certain feminist concerns. Before World War II English fiction tended to focus on the middle and upper-strata of society, especially in the works of women - witness George Eliot, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters. Even if they depicted heroines who are poor (poor heroines were a common romantic motif) they are genteel, respectable middle class. Witness Virginia Woolf who was well-off and wrote from that point of view, although she was aware of it herself. Her grand women are also grand hostesses. There's always a lot of good food going around.

Nobody really wrote of the life of the working class woman. And there were practically no novels even after the war, about the hundreds of women who worked in factories.

After the War, not only was there 'a marked reaction against what had gone before ... a particularly literary or cultural milieu which had class associations' but there was a tendency often to present things from 'a lower-middle or working class perspective'.⁶⁰ Doris Lessing's first book written after arriving in England from Africa in the nineteen fifties dealt with the lives of slum-dwellers in London.⁶¹ The problems that these women faced, sexual harassment, wife beating, lack of proper food and housing, repeated childbirths show them living in a Victorian situation. The housewife, the

underpaid shopgirl, maidservant or prostitute are people who have nothing to do with feminist concerns. The women who meet in groups to discuss are very different from these women. The former are often the most inarticulate among the oppressed. In her more recent book The Diaries of Janna Somers she explores the world of the poor and the aged from the point of a successful, glamorous fashion magazine editor.

Feminist criticism is today confronted with problems that touch both the middle class and the working class simply because after the War Class patterns too seem to have undergone a lot of change. In England and the United States the middle class housewife has almost as much work to do as the poorer women. For with increasing number of gadgets there is a corresponding pressure for the Home-Beautiful. In recognizing women's consciousness, and the nature of women's reality feminist criticism is more appreciative than critical. At times it is collective, the response to a book is worked out through discussions with others and at times it is personal, subjective and individualistic. Feminist criticism is finally the correction and revision of the mental conditioning that has put stamps upon literature. This is good or this is bad will no longer work. It can ask, Is this really true? or say, This does not tell the truth about me or others like me even though it claims to be universal. Feminist criticism asks what about those other writers you never taught us, or told us even existed? Why did women write novels and not poetry? Why are there no syllabi that prescribe Aphra Behn, when there are pages written on minor male playwrights and poets?

Feminist criticism is the revelation that literature as it is taught is one-sided, blind and arbitrary.

FOOTNOTES

As a matter of fact it was

1. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and ~~As a matter of fact it was~~ John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* that gave to discussions about women, the nature of a debate. Previous writings had been a one sided tirade against the wicked/weaker sex.
2. Juliet Mitchell writing of the British movement of the sixties finds the questioning of concepts begin from campaigns for equal pay, equal work and equal opportunities. 'Particular groups attack the ideological exploitation of women as 'sexual objects' by the media and industrial enterprises based on this sexual exploitation'. The promotion of birth-control involves investigations of the attitudes of doctors and of women, the capricious, profit-oriented control of it by chemical and rubber manufacturers, the arbitrariness of research into it and into allied gynaecological fields, the lack of the interest of the government and the biased hyper-interest of the press. The provision of nursery schools involves discussion of the mother-child relationship from the viewpoint of psychology The sexual exploitation of women and their enforced submission within a society committed - when it feels like it - to the 'naturalness' of their reproductive role, have caused the movement ~~of~~ to develop the notion of 'control of one's body As a worker finds himself alienated in his own product, so (roughly speaking) a woman finds herself alienated in her own commercialized body. The slogan 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' protests against this as it protests against the other dimension her submission to the arbitrariness of conception.

These are just some of the implications behind the major declared aims of, for instance, the English movement. If nothing else, they show how far reaching reform can be where women's oppression is concerned. In America there are much more extensive campaigns to reassess (and revalidate) the role of women in history, to eliminate sexism from the law, from the press and from school text-books (this is also happening in European countries - in fact, it was initiated in Sweden). Women in all countries are forming their own feminist theatre, their own pop-groups, their own cinema'. Woman's Estate by Juliet Mitchell, 1966, Penguin, London.

3. By a Woman Writer: Six Centuries of Writings by Women (ed.) Joan Coullanes, 'I had lived for two years working on this book - hearing that it did not really matter that woman writers existed. They were not really good anyway ... simply curiosities, pp.xix, New Eng. Library, London 1974.
4. Quoted, *Ibid.*, p.xv.
5. Women And Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920, Patricia Stubbs, Barnes and Noble, New York, 1979.
6. Sexual Politics Kate Millet, Doubleday New York, 1970.
7. 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' in Women Writing and Writing About Women, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1979.
8. Except Richardson's Pamela which is written in the form of a girl's letters about her experiences, and written by a man. The final outcome of this story is typically a product of male thinking for although it exposes the double standards of society, it finally upholds the status quo.
9. The Mill on The Floss, George Eliot, Washington Square Press, New York, 1964, p.9.
10. Middlemarch, George Eliot, Penguin Books, England, 1977, p.896.
11. Mary and the Wrongs of Woman, Mary Wollstonecraft (eds), James Kinsley and Gary Kelly, Oxford University Press, Oxford World Classics Paperback, 1980.
12. *Ibid.*, 'Advertisement'.
13. Mary Wollstonecraft The Rights of Women John Stuart Mill The Subjection of Women, Introduction by Pamela Frankau, Everyman's Library, London, 1977, pp.242-3.
14. *Ibid.*, p.245.
15. 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft' is the title of the essay. It is reviewed in The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World. Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (ed.) 1978, Croom Helm, London.

16. The Second Sex, p.13.
17. Virago Ltd., 1979, 5 Garton Street, London W1V 5EB.
18. A good example is Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory Josephine Donovan (ed.) Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975. Created out of a seminar the book contains an interesting article in the form of a dialogue between two feminist critics.
19. Myth, Religion and Mother Right, Princeton, 1967, Women And Folklore, University of Texas Press, 1976, Gods, Goddesses and Myths of Creation, Harper and Row, New York, 1974.
Language and Woman's Place, Harper and Row, New York, 1975.
20. Though the eighteenth century was a period of women novelists lots of whom depended upon writing for subsistence, Aphra Behn in the seventeenth century is the first woman to earn her living by her pen.
21. As late as the 1930's Virginia Woolf was writing in The Years about a family (set in the 1830s) where the women pinched and saved miserably to provide for their brothers.
22. It is a blessing because formulations would restrict and inhibit.
23. 'Feminist Literary Criticism' in Women Writing and Writing About Women in Mary Jacobus (ed) London: Croom Helm followed by a more recent one "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" Critical Inquiry 8 (Winter 1981).
24. Feminist Literary Criticism, p.23.
25. By a Woman Writt: Six Centuries of Writing by Women ed., Joan Goulianos, is a representative work.
26. Penguin Books, 1975, pp.63-65.
27. Communities of Women, pp.29.
28. A Room of One's Own, p.77.
29. Ibid.

30. Feminist Literary Criticism Explorationism Theory
(ed) Josephine Donovan, Lexington, University Press
of Kentucky 1975.
31. Knopf, New York, 1975.
32. Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Penguin.
33. Ohio State University, 1977.
34. Madness and Women, 'a study of the themes of insanity
and anger in modern literature by women', 1976.
35. Doctoral Dissertation, Renessaler Polytechnic Institute.
36. Expanding Eyes in Critical Inquiry, Vol. II (1975),
pp.201-2. Structuralism in Literature : An Introduction,
Robert Scholes, New Haven, 1974, p.118.
37. 'Towards a Feminist Poetics'.
38. Ibid.
39. Lee Edwaras and Diamond Anlyn (eds.) Amherst, Mass.
1977.
40. 'Writing as a Woman', Anne Stevenson in Women Writing
and Writing About Women, pp.166-8.
41. See p.13b.
42. Half The Sky : An Introduction to Women's Studies,
Published by VIRAGO Ltd., 1979, 5 Warden Street, London
W1V 3NE.
43. Feminist Literary Criticism in from Bibliographical
Introduction by Cheri Register.
44. Ibid.
45. The Second Sex, p.740.
46. A Room of One's Own, p.86.
47. At that time Russia was the only country where women
could hold property in her name.

48. It was over fifty years after Mary Wollstonecraft that in 1848 Queen's College London was established. In America, Oberlin College, Ohio opened its gates to girls along with boys in 1882.

Seven years later at a World Anti-Slavery Convention in London the presence of eight women among the American delegates aroused protests from the men. Two of the women vowed to fight this opposition. And in 1857 the first Women's Rights Convention was held at New York. In 1857 the first British Woman Suffrage Society was founded at Sheffield in England. Slowly Australia, New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries acceded to the demand for women suffrage. In Sweden, women writers took the lead in feminist struggle and demanded the right to education, work and liberty. In Fascist Italy, women's oppression was triple pronged as the church, state and family used custom, political force and emotional pressure to continue a tradition of slavery. In Germany feminism arose at the end of the eighteenth century and continued till the beginning of the nineteenth. Towards the middle of the century socialism changed the character of the earlier sentimental feminism and assimilated women into active politics and soon Nazism imposed the ideal of 'Kitchen, Church, Children but on saved women from certain Catholic customs and gave protection to mothers and illegitimate children. In Russia feminism arose from among female student intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century and was even then connected with violent and revolutionary activity. Organized bids for equality were made as they entered into men's jobs during the war with Japan. 1905 onwards they took part in the pre-Revolution struggles, in the October rising and battles against invasion. Russian women got equality in economic and political spheres, largely through the Marxist tradition. Even the family system was relaxed and facilities created for child rearing by the state. However, this situation has undergone several changes in the following decades.

----- The Second Sex

49. Woman's Estate and 'The Free Mothers : Pronatalism and working women in industry at the end of the last war in Britain' by Denise Riley in History Workshop. Issue 11, Spring 1981, pp.59-118.
50. Sexual Politics.

51. The Dialectic of Sex, Jonathan Cape, 1971, pp.228-9.
52. The Subjection of Women, Mill, The Holy Family, Karl Marx Origin of the Family Private Property and State, Frederick Engels, Woman in Past Present and Future, August Bebel.
53. 'New York Radical Feminist Manifesto' quoted in Women Power by Celestine Ware, Tower Public Affairs Books, 1970, p.58.
54. New York, 1963.
55. Some well-known anthologies are Notes from the Second Year, Readings from the Women's Liberation Movement, Anne Koedt and Shulamith Firestone (ed) New York, 1970. The Body Politic : Writings from the WLM in Britain 1969-72, London, 1972.
56. Women, The Longest Revolution; New Left Review, No.40, December 1966.
57. The Small Group Process, Pamela Allen, San Francisco Women's Liberation p.15 in The Small Groups : Three articles by Lynn O' Connor, Pam Allen, Liz Rindig, Women's Liberation Basement Press, Berkeley.
58. Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England, J and O Banks, London, 1972; The Cause : A Short History of the Womens Movement R. Atratchey (1928) reprinted by Virago, London 1977, Memories of a Militant, Anine Kennie, London 1924; are some of the books that came out or more reprinted.
59. Margaret Walters in Spare Rib, 3, September, 1972 from Spare Rib Reader Marsha Rowe (ed). Penguin Books, 1984, p.31.
60. 'The Postwar English Novel' in Possibilities : Essays on the State of the English Novel, OUP, 1973, Malcolm Bradbury.
61. In Pursuit of the English, Doris Lessing.