

## THE QUEST FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE SECOND SEX AND A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

SHOWKAT HUSSAIN DAR, DR. NASREEN MALIK

**Abstract:** Since centuries there has been a tradition of writing about the problem of women's unequal position in society and some of these have put forth solutions. Historically, there have been contributions from both men and women. The feminist writers bring to forth the marginalization of women under male hegemony. There is a galaxy of writers, especially women authors, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Susan Gubar, Kate Millet, Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine, Andrea Dworkin and many others who stood for women's emancipation, gender equality and empowerment. They challenged the unjust and exploitative gender based social constructions and radically changed the general perception of women's place in society. These women writers gave name and language and new idiom to express feminine sensibility. This gave rise to a new literary theory called literary feminism/feminist criticism. Feminist criticism questions/challenges long standing dominant phallogocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretation in literature. It also challenges traditional and acknowledged male ideas about the nature of women and about how women feel. This theory aims to comprehend the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Themes or subjects investigated in feminism include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification gender, oppression and patriarchy. One of the foundational and rudimental concerns of feminism is to exhibit that a woman is a being. She is not an accompaniment of man. A woman is not the 'other'; she is not an extension to man. She is an independent being, capable of, through trial and defect, finding her own way to emancipation.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Hegemony, Gender Equality, Empowerment, Literary Theory, Feminist Criticism, Patriarchy.

**Introduction:** Since times immemorial woman has been defined as daughter, sister, wife and mother. She is gentle, dependent, submissive and passive. Within the family, she is normally her husband's yes person. In the outside world/society, she is subordinate to man. She rarely leads an independent life. She lives in a bipolar world: on the one side, she is subordinated to the masculine world of her husband and on the other hand, committed to the assertion of her womanhood, her female ego. Her role as an individual or as a leader cannot be compared with men for they symbolize power, authority and dominance. The situation wherein females are defined in relation to man is what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "second sex." Simone de Beauvoir is the most resonated voice in the theory of feminist criticism. Besides being a novelist, essayist and biographer, She was a prominent twentieth century French existentialist philosopher, anti-colonialist and political activist. In 1949, she produced one of the most influential books of the twentieth century called *The Second Sex*. It is a revolutionary text that influenced twentieth century thinking profoundly. It is an attempt to confront human history from a feminist perspective. Beauvoir (1949) discusses how female humans came to occupy a subordinate position in the society. She turns to the disciplines of biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. These subjects unveil indisputable primary differences between men and women but offer no

justification for women's inferiority. She thereafter moves to history to discover the emergence of male superiority in society from nomadic-hunter gatherers through French Revolution and contemporary period. She further examines various mythical representations of women and indicates how these myths have established human consciousness, often to the disservice of women. Patricia Waugh (2006) uphold this assertion: "De Beauvoir constructed an epic account of gender division throughout history, examining biological, psychological, historical and cultural explanations for the reduction of women to a second and lesser sex." (p.320)

The basic premise of this treatise is that men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them at all levels as the 'other.' In the masculine or male dominated society men order and women carry them out, men produce situations and women live them, the only hope for a woman is another woman. Their experiences being identical, women alone can comprehend each other. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "The situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other." Man holds the role of the self, or subject, a woman is the object, the other. She is unimportant/inessential deficient/imperfect, mutilated whereas man is important, complete, perfect and absolute. He (man) extends out into the world to impose his volition on

it, whereas woman is doomed to immanence or inwardness. This situation is beautifully depicted by Beauvoir in these words: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other." Beauvoir (1949) aims to prove that women are not born 'feminine' but are shaped by thousands of external processes. At every stage of their life, they are conditioned into accepting passivity, subordination, dependence and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of her subjectivity and individuality flattening her into an object. Denying the possibility of independent work, women have to accept a dissatisfying life of domestic work, bearing and rearing children and so on. She rebels against bourgeois mentality that girls are meant to marry and bear children. Beauvoir investigates the situations/roles that subordinate her role. In this book, Beauvoir denounced patriarchal culture and examines the marginal position of women in society and the arts. In this text, she depicts how women are actually the 'other' and how they are on the margin in the patriarchal society. The book examines the woman's overall impression created in the society by men and in examining it exhibits the myth of male superiority. It is primarily concerned with the physical repression/subjugation of women. Furthermore, Beauvoir mentions it is only in work that women can achieve autonomy and a form of liberation. The *Second Sex* is regarded as one of the first books in which the suppressed female voice is articulated and the grandeur of woman is stated.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), pioneer of stream of consciousness technique, was a twentieth century English novelist, essayist, journalist, critic, biographer and memoir writer. She is one of the precursors of feminist criticism. She was the forerunner of the freedom of thought and expression for women. Woolf was a member of the 'Bloomsbury group' - an artistic and literary group famous for their rebellion against Victorian puritanism. She was born in an upper-class, highly educated family. Her father was Leslie Stephen, a famous Victorian biographer, historian, critic and philosopher. Though born in an educated family Virginia Woolf, like most women of her time, received no formal education, which Mary Wollstonecraft considered an important asset for women in particular and society at large. While her siblings went to Oxford and Cambridge universities, she was tutored by private teachers. In other words, she hardly went to schools. She more often read from her father's library some literary classics. This condition (no formal schooling) reflects the degradation of women in a patriarchal society. This theme is deftly explored in *A Room of One's Own*

(1929). Woolf's (1929) is a monumental work in feministic criticism. The work exposes the deprivation and exploitation of women who suffered economically, culturally, socially, and educationally in English society. She is the first female writer who used the term 'patriarchal value' which must be fought against.

The feminist viewpoint was ignored in literary criticism due to male supremacy. In all previous eras including Woolf's own, women had few choices outside of marriage and motherhood; they were discouraged or prohibited from learning, working, voting or owning property. These sensitive issues are aptly described in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf became a radical feminist with the publication of *A Room of One's Own*. One of the fundamental reasons of penning down a feminist monumental work like this was to bring forth the aforementioned issues. As Woolf writes in a letter to her friend Vita Sackill-west: "Think how I was bought: No schooling; mooning about alone among my father's books; never any chance to pick up all that goes on in schools – throwing balls; ragging; slang; vulgarities; scenes; jealousies!" Woolf insists that "a woman should have money and a room of her own if she has to write fiction." She uses room as a symbol for many larger issues such as privacy, leisure time, freedom of thought and financial independence for women. She strongly believed until women are provided equal opportunities especially in the matters of education, and employment women will remain second-class citizens. In this book, Woolf elaborates this fact by giving her own experience. Woolf shows us how she was prohibited from entering the university library by administrative authorities. According to her, the university library was meant for male students, faculty members and not for female students like Woolf. During Woolf's times women were not allowed to visit the libraries for education was solely meant for men. The university library then becomes a symbol of male logocentrism.

Woolf describes George Eliot, Emile Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen as "four great novelists" and continuously refers to their works as the ideal product of a woman's ability to writing fiction. Throughout the book she compares and contrasts other authors to these four women novelists. She points out that none of them struggled financially and therefore wrote beautiful fiction. She gives them undue importance because they wrote in a male dominated society. But, Woolf asserts that if these writers wrote fiction, it does not mean all women enjoy the same status and opportunities around the world. Rather, most of the women are treated unequally in their society and that is why they (females) have produced less impressive works of writing than men. To illustrate her point, the narrator

creates a woman character named Judith Shakespeare, the imaginary sister of Shakespeare. The narrator tells us, Judith is as talented as her brother Shakespeare. But, unfortunately, Shakespeare's talents are recognized and encouraged by their family and rest of the society. Judith's are underestimated, deemphasized and denounced. Judith writes but she writes secretly in order to avoid the family and public wrath. The example of male supremacy comes to the fore when Judith is asked to marry at the tender age and that too without her consent. She begs not to marry but her father beats her. She eventually commits suicide. This shows us women were forced to take some extreme measures. In other words, they were not allowed to breathe freely in this world. Woolf in this book reminds her readers that women have always been at the receiving end, not for two hundred years but from the time beginning. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf beautifully describes the pathetic and deplorable condition of women and asserts that women will continue to remain in this condition unless and until they are provided their own rooms and equal opportunities in all day-to-day affairs of life.

**Conclusion:** Patriarchy indicates the structures through which male domination over women is

achieved. Feminist writing seeks to unveil the mindset in men and women that perpetuates gender inequality. Specific heed is paid to male writers constructing typical and influential images of women. Feminist criticism of the period is certainly abrasive, polemical and combative. Add to this fact that in the 1980s, feminist criticism began to be influenced by the development of other branches of literary theory. It also veered away from the critique of a male version of the world. It acknowledged that the history of civilization/mankind has been formulated as the history of men, and women have been rendered invisible in that narrative. Feminism then solicits to recuperate women from the periphery of history and make women's experience visible. In other words, it explores the nature of women's experiences and seeks to reestablish the lost/suppressed narratives of women's experience. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* are considered monumental works of twentieth century. These both works are the manifesto of feminism. They are regarded the first books expressing exclusively feminist ideas. *The Second Sex* and *A Room of One's Own* illustrate the statement that women need to be educated and thoroughly stressed to end the gender differences.

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Showkat Hussain Dar  
 PhD Scholar, Department of English, Mewar University, Rajasthan  
 Dr. Nasreen Malik  
 Professor English, J&K Higher Education Department, Jammu & Kashmir, India