
The problematic of feminist criticism: between the diversity of terms and the complexity of concepts

Zahra KHALES¹
University of Bejaia
Email: zahra.khales@univ-bejaia.dz

Fadhila ALIOUCHOUCHE
LESMS Laboratory
University of Bejaia
Email: fadhila.aliouchouche@univ-bejaia.dz

Received 22/05/2024

Accepted 18/06/2024

Published 01/07/2024

Abstract

The term “feminist criticism” refers to an analytical approach that examines literary, artistic and cultural works from a gender studies perspective. Therefore, feminist criticism is linked to two fundamental axes. The first involves the study of the image of women in literature produced by men, while the second concerns the study of texts produced by creative women. Feminist criticism aims to re-establish women's value as full participants in all aspects of life, rejecting the appropriation of women and male domination. It addresses the representation of women as writers and subjects, focusing on the appropriation of female personalities within male creative frameworks and the liberation of women from male domination in feminist discourse. The present article attempts to explore the term "feminist criticism," its origins, initiators, fields, and main critics. It also addresses the diversity of terms used and the complexity of concepts associated with feminist criticism. It has been concluded that feminist criticism is primarily an ideological liberation movement rather than a purely aesthetic interrogation process. The term "feminist criticism" has sparked much debate in the literary criticism arena, between proponents and opponents. Moreover, this critical arena has witnessed terminological chaos in unifying the term and defining it precisely.

Keywords: term; feminist criticism; feminist literature; male literature; recipient.

¹Corresponding author: Zahra KHALES, zahra.khales@univ-bejaia.dz.

Journal of Languages & Translation © 2024. Published by University of Chlef, Algeria

This is an open access article under the CC BY license <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Introduction

The term “feminist criticism” refers to an analytical approach that examines literary, artistic and cultural works from a gender studies perspective. This approach focuses on the representation of women, their role in works, and issues related to gender equality. The main aim of feminist criticism is to highlight women's perspectives and experiences, and to challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal power structures maintained in cultural works. Therefore, feminist criticism is linked to two fundamental axes. The first involves the study of the image of women in literature produced by men, while the second concerns the study of texts produced by creative women. These two axes converge on a common point, namely the revelation of women's suffering due to injustice, oppression and marginalization in male writings on the one hand, and on the other, the development and activation of women's role as dramatic characters in current and future works.

1. Definition of Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism is an ideological and artistic movement that emerged in the USA and Europe in the 1960s. Its first areas of intervention were mainly the fine arts and literature, and then it spread to other fields such as theater, political discourse, ideological discourse, cinema, etc. The feminist critic adopts a purely ideological approach in all writing that takes a bold stand against patriarchy, oppression, the idea of male superiority, and demands gender equality, the recognition and reclamation of her inherent freedom in a society where she is not seen as an independent being, but rather as subordinate to man who oppresses her. This has led to the emergence of what is known as feminist literature, in which women freely express their condition. In this context, names connected to feminism as Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson, emerged. Moreover, feminist criticism came to interpret and interrogate what women wrote, as well as what men wrote about them. This modern term has attracted a great deal of interest from critics and researchers in creative writing.

2. The problematic of “terms”

The field of literary criticism has witnessed the birth of feminist literature and criticism, charged with defining female creativity, which for many years was marginalized by male domination. Subsequently, this literature was presented to the reader through the imposition of successive protest movements and political feminist revolutions. However, some issues related to the terms such as literary criticism and feminist criticism raised.

Literary and critical terms encounter a number of problems as they move from one language to another, due to varying translations or divergent usage by different critics. As a result, the term literary criticism or critique becomes subject to a multiplicity that plunges it into the embarrassment of the term. This issue has been addressed by critics who have attempted to identify its causes. For example, the term “feminist criticism” is unfamiliar in the Arab environment. As a matter of fact, in the course of its evolution, it has been confronted with several obstacles, among them the problem of its definition. Consequently, this situation has led to the appearance of numerous terms, including: feminist criticism, gender criticism, gender critics, etc.

Some critical terms are encountering great difficulties in defining their concepts, due to the confusion that surrounds their meanings and the lack of effort by critics to find a way out of the terminological crisis that continues to plague critical work, particularly in the Arab context. These terms are seeking solutions to this crisis by developing strategies to clearly define their nature, readjusting them to ensure scientific accuracy in this field. The term “feminist criticism” has deviated from its initial course of definition, and its revision has become difficult. *“Because of the*

density of the terms, the general problematic of the term feminist criticism is not limited to isolated difficulties but constitutes a set of problems that represent a complex phase that has repercussions on the legitimate terms.” (Aziz, 2016, p. 16) One of the main difficulties in developing a unified term lies in its rootedness in historical context. *“Women have been subjected to a cultural and social siege which, because of their femininity, has made them look down on by all. Thus, the problematic of the feminist critical term is not limited to a crisis of translation or linguistic transfer.”* (Aziz, 2016, p. 40) It goes beyond the linguistic boundaries to address the concepts that the term conveys historically and intellectually.

This line of thinking has generated fundamental differences among critics, who are now looking for an alternative to stabilize and unify the term. *“The difference in the definition of the concept of feminist literature, as well as the delimitation of its boundaries and areas of application, have played a key role in the conflict of Arab critical opinions.”* (Shteiwi, 2021, p. 409) This confusion has led to a massive proliferation of terms that have invaded feminist criticism, with each group adopting a term to suit the critic's cognitive preferences. Furthermore, some critics have chosen to address the subject in a Western context. *“One of the indications of methodological failure and critical disorder is to apply a methodology using the terms of other approaches.”* (Ghalisi, 2008, p. 57)

3. The principles of feminist criticism

Feminist criticism focuses on many ideas related to the human race and aims to give a voice to marginalized women. Therefore, it focuses on the central role of women in narratives reflecting their multifaceted contributions and challenges. Moreover, while some characters attempt to exploit them, the text portrays a resilient spirit prevailing against such efforts. It strives to decrease the males' dominance, both in professional spheres and personal relationships, advocating for greater equality and empowerment. Besides, the narrative tries to foster women's consciousness, encouraging recognition of their inherent worth and potential within their society.

4. Features of feminist criticism

Feminist criticism tends to focus on the inner world of women, including personal and emotional aspects, highlighting this side through a critical reading of women's works in fiction and short history in particular.

Furthermore, it is interested in uncovering the literary history of women's heritage, a history that previous work has neglected due to the alleged dominance of male writers and historians in this field of research.

Feminist critics continually strive to define the specific characteristics of women's language, their feminine style, with its metaphorical images and imagination.

Feminist criticism seeks to abolish the differences between the sexes in what is known as “genderization”, using the latter to designate a person's cultural or social identity, regardless of sex. This question is intrinsically linked to the feminist movement's current aims of challenging traditional social concepts based on the functional distinction between men and women on the basis of biological criteria.

5. The first drafts of feminist criticism

In the 1960s, Anglo-American critics became interested in the study of all literary creations by women. Among the most notable works in this context are Mary Ellmann's "Thinking with Women", as well as Phyllis Chesler's "Women and Madness", and Catherine Millet's "The Politics of Madness", in which the author highlights male sexual domination in certain works by Western writers such as the narratives of David Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet. This stems from their use of narrative linguistic units that reveal that the writer is addressing a specific and unique reader, who is male (Ghalisi, 2008, p. 165).

The birth of this critical trend passed in America, then England, and finally France, where it set its ends, motivations, curricula and foundations. The names of many critics shone, including Simon de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Julia Christiva and Ellen Schwalter. The great credit goes to the critic Ellen Schwalter in her placement of the name now known as "feminist criticism".

The first preoccupations of feminist criticism, as previously stated, were shared by Westerners in the 1960s with the feminist emancipation movements, accusing the Western world of its patriarchal system. These repercussions amounted to the birth of this critical approach, from which a basic building block was taken among the feminist public and its pioneers, who gave high priority to women creativity and individuality. (Ghalisi, 2008, p. 166)

Feminist criticism writings began at the beginning of the twentieth century in a libertarian character, exemplified by the writings of female workers who struggled to obtain equal-pay work rights with men. These writings served as the ground for women's gateway to criticism, perspectives and history.

Feminist criticism emerged in the context of a post-structural epistemology based on openness between critical approaches and their interaction with each other and linked to feminist liberation and opposition movements that intensified in the 1970s. These acts embodied the first rule that paved the way for its own cash movement, as it was marginalized by moral criticism and its men. (Ghalisi, 2008, p. 167)

The Marxist feminist movement continued to fluctuate with rapid world events and literary and critical developments. Thus, creative works, critical studies and intellectual works in the field of literature emerged, reinforcing the political and economic struggle within the social field. These works include, among others: "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf, published in 1929, Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex", published in 1949, Julia Kristeva's "The Poetic", published in 1969, Catherine Millet's "Sexual Policy", published in 1970 and Helene Cixous's "Toward a Feminist Rhetoric", published in 1979.

These studies contributed to a renewal of the spirit of the feminist movement and a change of direction. They moved from the sphere of literary creation to the establishment of a new term, namely "feminist criticism", based on an internal approach to women's texts, far removed from male approaches ranging from total ignorance of these texts to depreciation of their value on the grounds that the author is a "woman".

Feminist critical writing is not only a study of the creative texts of women writers, but also includes a series of intellectual practices on many subjects, all related to the subject of women and their intellectual and ideological struggle against the patriarchal society; "Virginia Woolf", "Simon de Beauvoir" the West as a patriarchal society that has deprived women of their ambitions and rights

and that the definition of women is related to men, is dominant and is "another" negative marginal. (Ghalisi, 2008, p. 168)

6. Some critics' views of the term feminist criticism

Among the critics who have been so diligent in feminist criticism, we can state:

- Critic Bassam Qattous

According to him: "*feminist criticism that emerged under the urgency of need and self-empowerment, and the realization of identity as an extension of the existence of women's writing, not merely as a writing of formality defined by gender, but as a writing with its own characteristics, outside of racial differences that distinguish men from women.*" (Qatous, 2006, p. 215) So, from this point of view, we can deduce that there are two types of writing "feminist and masculine" and each type has its own characteristics. Here lies the role of feminist criticism in identifying aesthetic differences as supported by Bassam Qutous who states that "*He is a critic who cares about studying women's literature, pursues her role in their creativity and seeks his aesthetic, linguistic and constructive characteristics.*" (Qatous, 2006, p. 218)

- Critic Hafnawi Baali

He emphasized the importance of feminist criticism in analysing and studying the dimensions of women's internal world, including emotional matters. He argued that: "*It tends to focus on the inner world of women, including personal and emotional matters, and to demonstrate this aspect through critical reading of women's work, which is the literary history inherited by women.*" (Baali, 2015, p. 10)

- Critic Mary Holly

She rejected feminist criticism of women's inferiority and demanded the establishment of a new feminist aesthetic philosophy through which women's work was assessed. Of course, she insisted on imposing a break of masculine criticism when she said that feminist criticism:

It is a rejection of all women's subjects in society; it comes from a radical perspective of literature, various sexual roles and represents a tentative step for a feminist literary masculinity formula that establishes a complete breakthrough with all the criteria of constructive male values, thereby assessing and analyzing literature from the perspective of the original life of women/females and thus demonstrating that we, the women's cohort, are beginning to look at ourselves, and our culture is completely new. (Holley, 2004, p. 106)

- The philosopher Roger Garudi

He is one of the modern philosophers known as a "privileged feminist thinker" in most of his writings, especially in his book "For the Advancement of the Female", in which he said that feminism: "*is not the monopoly of women alone but is a philosophy of both sexes, that is, everyone who believes in and struggles for the principles of this philosophy.*" (Mazarji, 1981)

7. -The problem of multiple terms for feminist criticism

In the critical field, these terms have often overlapped, but it is important to emphasize their difference despite the fact that they all share the same subject, namely “woman”. On the one hand, it is difficult to integrate them under a single unified concept, and on the other, there is another difficulty associated with the multiple translations of each term.

a- Feminist Criticism

It is the common term and bearer of the central meaning of the foundations of critical orientation, which we find common in French writings dealing with all writings that defend women and their issues, whether or not they are the authors of these texts. Feminist critical functions, according to Hafnawi Baali, are limited to "*analysing literary texts from a woman's point of view and proceeding from the defence of the cause and rights of women, so he looks at the texts she writes from this angle.*" (Baali, Paths of Criticism and Postmodern Orbits , 2013)

Feminist criticism focuses on women, advocating for them and their cause to reclaim their rights from a society that marginalized them as individuals, suppressed their artistic and intellectual creativity, and made them prisoners of dominant men. Due to these social pressures, critics are required to focus on them and decipher their codes in order to reveal all the hidden injustices.

Feminist criticism is a new practice in the literary and critical arena for relying on women's experience, which has demonstrated their aesthetic touch in analysing texts. It is also the justification for women to confront their fate, which was suppressed by this touch. Critic Majda Said explained that: "*The voice of women, which has been repressed within the literary institution for a long time, relies on women's experience in researching women's issues morally and is different from the critical curricula that exist in the literary arena.*" (Saeed, 2004, p. 204)

b- The term "Gynocriticism"

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) used it extensively in much of her writing, adopting this critical approach in its early stages on the basis of the foundations she laid down in her book entitled “The Second Sex”. In this book, the critic addressed the gender, identity and vision of society of both sexes.

Kate Miller has a distinctive analysis in her book tagged "Sex Policy" in terms of gender and the oppression of women under the patriarchy. (Awad, 1994, p. 45) Accordingly, women's criticism examines with scrutiny the texts whose subjects center on the authority of patriarchal society over women in terms of the history of writing by women... their methods, subjects, the literary genders they used, their structures and psychological mechanisms of women's creativity, individual and social work and the development of laws of women's literary traditions (Gamble, 2002, p. 363). Only women's creative writings are therefore the core subject of women's criticism, as is the feminist criticism, the material of which is made up of both women and men.

c- Female criticism (Critique Féminine)

This critical term has been widely used in English writings, which expresses "*a dogmatic attitude, stemming from the attachment to what the owner believes or believes to be special features of the female, her vision of the world and her attitude to it*" (Baali, Paths of Criticism and Postmodern Orbits , 2013, p. 153). The specificities of the female criticism lie, on the one hand, in the qualities

of the female, her view of the world and her ideological attitudes, and, on the other hand, in her characteristics.

Zahra Jlassi calls for the adoption of the term “feminine”, regardless of the objections raised by the term “feminine”, as the focus is on the text itself, examining the mechanisms of differentiation that dispense with the confrontation between masculine/feminine with all its conflicting ideological transformations.

Thus, the issue of feminist criticism is no longer limited to the search for a precise and appropriate term but lies essentially in its methodology. In other terms, the problematic of feminist criticism manifests itself in the critical methodologies used to analyze women's literary production. Some of these methodologies fail to explore the female imagination and produce a thorough reading of the literary structure of their texts. Thus, the analyst of women's literature needs a methodology to reveal its hidden meanings and to perform an objective reading that highlights its creative and artistic characteristics.

Feminist criticism is an extension of what the feminist movement has achieved in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and social analysis, to uncover the various images of women and reveal forms of discrimination against them. Additionally, the feminist movement did not create a specific critical model for itself. This was pointed out by the pioneer of feminist criticism, Ellen Schreiber, who argued that *"Until recently, feminist criticism was not a theoretical basis but a lonely orphan groping its way in the stormy world of theories."* Similarly, Annette Kolodny stated that *"feminist literary criticism appears as a collection of methods and arts, each of which can replace the other more than it constitutes a cohesive critical school or direction towards a common goal."* (Kohler, 2003, p. 99)

So, there is no specific feminist approach adopted by feminist critical representatives. The essence of feminist critical writings is the desire to free women from men. They can no longer settle on certain monetary bases, making feminist criticism captive to its ideological image. In the same vein, Mohamed Anani states that *"We are not in the process of a critical approach, that is, applied critical steps based on specific literary concepts and subject to coherent scientific logic, but against intellectual currents that converge on women's triumph, having been deprived of their rights"* (Anan, 1991, p. 58)

8. The critique of feminist criticism

Feminist criticism was subject to criticisms and objections. For example, it is considered as a paradoxical critic that rejects the idea that literature can be classified either as masculine or feminine, while trying to convince us of the existence of artistic criteria and evaluations specific to feminine literature and others specific to masculine literature. If we accept the validity of the motivations behind the emergence of feminist criticism, we fear that this will isolate literature written by women, with male critics becoming supporters of masculine literature and women of feminine literature, and in both cases, women losing part of their literary status.

The criteria adopted by feminist critics in reading are personal criteria, as there is no clear boundary between what is subjective in the analysis of women's literature and what is systematic or objective. Despite these criticisms, feminist criticism quickly became one of the most remarkable currents in Western and Arab literary culture. Indeed, journals such as Hagar, Ta'akee, and others sprang up, specializing in the publication of critical studies of women's literature have emerged.

Conclusion

Based on what has been mentioned in the discussion, it has been concluded that feminist criticism is primarily an ideological liberation movement rather than a purely aesthetic interrogation process. Among the fundamental premises of feminist criticism is the correction of socially and culturally misconceptions about women, especially those prevalent in male consciousness. One of the important foundations of feminist criticism since its inception is that most feminist critical works have sought to highlight the positive image of women and the unique aspects of their literary and critical productions. Feminist criticism emerged from both intellectual and literary struggles in its early days, eventually merging with literary criticism in the contemporary era. Finally, the term "feminist criticism" has sparked much debate in the literary criticism arena, between proponents and opponents. Moreover, this critical arena has witnessed terminological chaos in unifying the term and defining it precisely.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article according to the APA:

KHALES .Z & ALIOUCHOUCHE.F (2024), *The problematic of feminist criticism: between the diversity of terms and the complexity of concepts*, *Journal of Languages & Translation*, 04(02), Laboratory of information and communication technologies in the teaching of foreign languages and translation, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef, Algeria, pages.195-202.

Bibliography

- Al-Saif, K. bin A. A. (2016). *The Problem of the Feminist Terminology: A Semantic Study* (1st ed.). Dar Al-Takween for Studies and Research.
- Anani, M. (2021). *Analytical Criticism* (1st ed.). Egyptian General Book Authority.
- Awad, Y. N. (1994). *The Theory of Literary Criticism*. Dar Al-Amin for Printing, Publishing and Distribution.
- Baali, H. (2013). *Paths of Criticism and Postmodern Orbits* (1st ed.). Dar Al-Yazouri Scientific.
- Baali, H. (2015). *The Panorama of Feminist Criticism in the Discourse of Egyptian Women Critics*. Dar Al-Yazouri Scientific.
- Gamble, S. (2002). *Feminism and Post-Feminism*. General Authority for Books and Public Records.
- Holley, M. (2004). Awareness and Authenticity towards Establishing Feminist Esthetics. *Fosul Magazine*, 65.
- Jaroudi, R. (1988). For the Advancement of Women. *Al-Adab Magazine*, Month Year.
- Kohler, J. (2003). *Introduction to Literary Theory* (M. Abdel Salam, Trans.) (1st ed.). Supreme Council for Arab Culture.
- Qatous, B. (2006). *Introduction to Contemporary Criticism Methods* (1st ed.). Dar Al-Wafa for Printing and Publishing.
- Saeed, M. (2004). *The Image of Women in Arab Culture: Al-Jahiz's Narratives as an Example*. *Mahawar Magazine*, 1.
- Shteiwi, J. (2021). The Problem of the Term Feminist Literature. *Journal of Cultural and Artistic Studies*, 1(17).
- Youssef, & Ghalisi. (2008). *The Problem of Terminology in New Arab Criticism* (1st ed.). Difference Publications.