

# Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories Feminist Criticism: Lecture 1

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# Feminist Criticism

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Throughout the history of civilization, women have been subjugated by men.

Aristotle has written that a woman is a woman by virtue of some “lack.”

Women are seen as inferior beings. They are seen as being emotional and child-like.

Women are marginalized and stereotyped by patriarchal discourse, (girls play with dolls; boys don't cry).



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The *Oxford Dictionary* gives the following definitions of patriarchy:

- a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line.
- a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.

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The proactive fight for equality goes back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This included the right to vote, and the right to own property. In England women did not get right to vote 1928. A bill passed in 1918 only partially gave the right to vote to women, in this case, women who owned property. Others got this right in 1928.

The fight for the right to vote is known as the Suffragette Movement.



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Many modern women in the US and Europe and even India, never question their right to open a bank account, own property. These rights, however, were hard won: for much of history, and even up to 40 years ago, middle-class women were not allowed to handle money; even having a job was seen as a sign of financial desperation.

As an example, UK did not allow equal heritage to women until 1922.

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Just like women were denied the right to vote and the right to own property, yet another right denied to them was equal pay for equal work.

Up until the WWII, women were largely confined to the domestic sphere. But during the WWII, when men left home to fight, women sought employment in production units and factories to earn their bread and butter.

But sadly, these women did not get paid equally.



# Feminist Criticism

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Feminist Criticism has its roots in Feminism, which began as a political movement, demanding equal rights and recognition to women.

Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. Feminism incorporates the position that societies prioritize the male point of view, and that women are treated unjustly within those societies. Efforts to change that include fighting against gender stereotypes and establishing educational, professional, and interpersonal opportunities and outcomes for women that are equal to those for men.

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**Stereotyping:** a fixed idea that many people have about a thing or a group that may often be untrue or only partly true, and could be based upon prejudice.  
(All women love to cook; Boys like to play with cars)

**Backgrounding:** the process by which a character's voice is silenced, and the character is not given due subjectivity



# Feminist Criticism

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Feminist criticism is concerned with “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 83).

This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and aims to expose misogyny in writing about women, which can take explicit and implicit forms.

# Feminist Criticism

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This misogyny, Tyson reminds us, can extend into diverse areas of our culture: “Perhaps the most chilling example...is found in the world of modern medicine, where drugs prescribed for both sexes often have been tested on male subjects only” (85).

Feminist criticism is also concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon: “...unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to underrepresent the contribution of women writers” (Tyson 84).



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Though a number of different approaches exist in feminist criticism, there exist some areas of commonality. This list is excerpted from Tyson (92):

Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which women are oppressed.

In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values.

All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, for example, in the Biblical portrayal of Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world.

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While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (scales of masculine and feminine).

All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality.

Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

(Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)