

# Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories Feminist Criticism: Lecture 5

---

By Dr. Pooja Agarwal  
Department of English and Modern European  
and Other Foreign Languages  
(School of Languages)

# Feminist Criticism

---

**Kate Millett (1934-2017)** *Sexual Politics* (1970)

## **Main Ideas:**

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* began as her doctoral thesis at Columbia University. The volume examines the various ways in which traditional gender roles have undermined women's power and roles in society, and how men have used marriage, family structure, wage discrimination, and sexual relations to keep women from attaining their true potential.



# Feminist Criticism

---

Her criticism of the patriarchal society and her ideas about the rights of women, which were considered radical when first published, helped form the foundation for basic theories of feminism. Millet posited that natural differences between the genders had been twisted to imply superiority and inferiority, with men capitalizing on their greater physical strength to give themselves power. This structure carries over into male homosexual relationships, where one partner is traditionally considered the dominant, more powerful or "male" partner, while the weaker, less forceful or dominant partner is ascribed the "female" role. These labels are derived from the traditional structure of a male-dominated society.

# Feminist Criticism

---

Patriarchal religion, popular attitude, and to some degree, science as well assumes psycho-social distinctions to rest upon biological differences between the sexes, so that where culture is acknowledged as shaping behavior, it is said to do no more than cooperate with nature. Yet the temperamental distinctions created in patriarchy (“masculine” and “feminine” personality traits) do not appear to originate in human nature, those of role and status still less.



# Feminist Criticism

---

It is often assumed that patriarchy is endemic in human social life, explicable or even inevitable on the grounds of human physiology. Such a theory grants patriarchy logical as well as historical origin.

We are not accustomed to associate patriarchy with force. So perfect is its system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its values, so long and so universally has it prevailed in human society, that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation.

# Feminist Criticism

---

**Elaine Showalter (b. 1941):** *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1949)

## **Main Ideas:**

Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

**Feminine:** In the Feminine phase (1840–1880), “women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature” (New, 137).

**Feminist:** The Feminist phase (1880–1920) was characterized by women’s writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women’s rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.



# Feminist Criticism

---

**Female:** The Female phase (1920— ) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, “women reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature” (New, 139).

# Feminist Criticism

---

Rejecting both imitation and protest, Showalter advocated approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current Female phase, rather than from perspectives that traditionally come from an androcentric perspective like psychoanalytic and biological theories, for example. Feminists in the past have worked within these traditions by revising and criticizing female representations, or lack thereof, in the male traditions (that is, in the Feminine and Feminist phases).



# Feminist Criticism

---

Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness (1981), Showalter says, “A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space” (New, 260).

# Feminist Criticism

---

Showalter says the most constructive approach to future feminist theory and criticism lies in a focus on nurturing a new feminine cultural perspective within a feminist tradition that at the same time exists within the male tradition, but on which it is not dependent and to which it is not answerable.



# Feminist Criticism

---

Showalter coined the term “gynocritics” to describe literary criticism based in on a female perspective. Probably the best description Showalter gives of gynocritics is in *Towards a Feminist Poetics*:

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (New, 131)

# Feminist Criticism

---

This does not mean that the goal of gynocritics is to erase the differences between male and female writing; gynocritic is not “on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels” (New, 266). Rather gynocritic aims to understand women’s writing not as a product of sexism but as a fundamental aspect of female reality.

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