

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 29
Feminism and Literature I: Mary Wollstonecraft

Hello and welcome back to a new lecture in this series on Literary Theory, in our last lecture we have completed discussing psychoanalysis. And, today we are going to move on to the topic of Feminism and how feminism relates to the field of literary studies. Now, feminism appears to be a much maligned term and someone like Margaret Walters.

For instance in her book feminism: A Very Short Introduction, devotes the whole of the first chapter, to trace the long history of opposition to the term feminism and what is interesting is that, this opposition does not merely come from people, who are opposed to the idea of equality of women. But also from people like Virginia Woolf, whose works are regarded as central to contemporary feminist theory, we will talk more about Virginia Woolf says opposition to the term feminism later on when, we discuss her in more details.

But what I want to focus on right now is that, there is a problem involved in dealing with a theoretical term that is so, regularly vilified. And, the problem is that in such cases, we end up with a purely negative theoretical category of sort of a blank, a perversion, a lack, which becomes difficult to study in itself. So, one of the first things that, we need to do here I think is to try and fix some sort of a positive understanding, positive definition of feminism.

As a theoretical category, which can act as the basis for our exploration, I think a good definition of feminism is provided by Chris Weedon, at the very beginning of her book titled, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory.

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“Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we become.”

(Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory)

Where Weedon writes and I quote, “Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom what we are and what we become.”

Now, this definition is particularly good, because by explaining feminism in terms of resistance to patriarchy, it reveals feminism in its full scope. So, just as patriarchy is ubiquitous and just as it structures all areas of life, feminist resistance to it is also equally ubiquitous. But for a lecture series like ours, this very ubiquity of feminism poses a problem. If feminism pervades every aspect of our life or can potentially pervade, every aspect of our life that is structured by patriarchy.

Then how do we even start studying it? How do we find the beginning of feminism? How do we trace its history? What social cultural and political or economic context do we locate feminism within? Since, these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered with the help of Weedon’s definition I propose moving on to a narrower definition of the term, which we can find in Oxford English dictionary.

In Oxford English dictionary after defining feminism as a movement associated with the advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of political social and economic

rights of the female sex, the note then goes on to add section, a kind of a footnote, which is very important for our purpose and this footnote or this annotation reads as follows.

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“The issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th cent., with regard especially to property rights, the marriage relationship, and the right to vote. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th cent. that there was significant political change. A ‘second wave’ of feminism arose in the 1960s, concerned especially with economic and social discrimination, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood. A more diverse ‘third wave’ is sometimes considered to have arisen in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against the perceived lack of focus on class and race issues in earlier movements.”

(Oxford English Dictionary)

“The issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th century, with regard especially to property rights, the marriage relationship and the right to vote. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffrage movement in the late 19th century that there was a significant political change. A quote unquote second wave of feminism arose in the 1960s, concerned especially with economic and social discrimination, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood. A more diverse quote unquote third wave is sometimes considered to have arisen in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against the perceived lack of focus on class and race issues in earlier movements.

Now, this particular definition and the note accompanying it, do it lacks the kind of comprehensiveness offered by Whedon’s definition makes up for it. In terms of practical usefulness by providing us with some definite spatial and temporal coordinates from within, which to study feminism; so, according to this definition feminism, as it is popularly understood, is a cluster of movements for women’s rights that can be traced back to the late 18th century.

These movements played out in the context of the post enlightenment west and largely remained confined to Western Europe and America at least till the 1980s and 1990s.

Since, then according to this definition and the note attached to it. Feminist movements have become more inclusive of race and class and have consequently spilled beyond the bourgeois white woman centric discourse.

Now, there are of course, some very obvious problems with this particular definition for instance, it may be quite justifiably argued that this definition is too west centric in its orientation and does not take into account the long history of movement for women's rights that took place within other socio cultural contexts. For example, this definition does not allow us to take into account the anti patriarchal activism of individuals like Savitribai Phule for instance or Bingham Rukia or Tarabai Shinde or Pandita Ramabai.

But, then this is a gap that haunts not just this definition in particular, but indeed how feminism is popularly understood and popularly discussed. The mainstream discourse of feminism considers the post enlightenment west to be the major wellspring of feminism and in this lecture series, we will use this mainstream understanding of feminism. But, at the same time even while working within this particular west centric definition of feminism, we should be definitely conscious about its limitations, which is why I pointed this out to you.

And in fact, if you find interest in feminism, I would definitely encourage you to go beyond the confines of post enlightenment western feminism. And, to do a more exhaustive research on the different ways in which, women's rights has been advocated in different cultures and in different historical periods. So, with these introductory comments about defining feminism, let us now move on to the study of some of its major aspects. Now, one of the ways of studying feminism has been by looking at the different waves of feminist movement, but since we have been approaching theoretical categories, in this lecture series by focusing on individuals and their works, we will continue with that convention even here.

So, when we will talk about the waves, we will talk about them in our discussion of some figure or the other. So, in this lecture series, I will try and introduce feminism to you of course, in the more spatially and temporally limited sense of the term through the works of 3 different intellectuals. We will deal with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft then Virginia Woolf and then we will move on to Simone de Beauvoir.

So, let us start with Mary Wollstonecraft today, we will be dealing with Wollstonecraft in this lecture and then in our next lecture, we will move on to Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

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Mary Wollstonecraft
(1759 - 1797)



Source: Wikipedia

Now, Wollstonecraft her dates are 1759 to 1797 and she was born in a middle class English family, which had fallen on bad deeds. In many ways her upbringing was representative of the upbringing of any girl within lower middle class families of 18th century England.

So, since her family had fallen to poverty only one among the 7 Wollstonecraft siblings, where chosen to receive formal education. And, given the patriarchal norms of the day it is unsurprising to note that neither Mary nor any of her sisters qualified for formal education rather, it was her brother Edward, who was chosen for that privilege and who was deemed to be the most suitable for formal education simply, because he was a boy.

Now, here let me briefly stop and clarify the term patriarchy I have used it again just now. I am sure, it is a very well understood term in general, but nevertheless it is always good to have a definition at hand and this is a definition, which I have borrowed from the same book of Chris Weedon from which I had quoted a few moments ago.

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“The term patriarchal refers to power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. [...]. In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male.”

(Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory)

So, as per Weedon in, the term patriarchy or patriarchal refers to power relations, in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take many forms from, the sexual division of labor and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social rule of women are defined in relation to a norm, which is male.

Now, I will not try to elaborate on this definition because, it is assertions are lucid enough and are known enough to be understood clearly. So, let us move on with Wollstonecraft life though, Wollstonecraft did not receive any formal education, she was taught to read and write and she used that to become an autodidact or a self talk person from quite early on in her life.

In contemporary England, the occupations that were available to a gentlewoman like Wollstonecraft were severely limited and they constituted primarily of a either being a governess or a companion to a lady or being a teacher to young children. Mary Wollstonecraft tried out most of these professions during her lifetime, but she really came on her own, when her publisher friend and patron Joseph Johnson offered her the role of a contributor in his analytical review. One of the chief disappointments of Wollstonecraft’s life was her relationship with American merchant named Gilbert Emily

with whom, she was passionately in love and with whom she had a child named Fanny, outside the wedlock.

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Mary Shelley
(1797 – 1851)



Source: Wikipedia

After her separation with Emily, Wollstonecraft married the English journalist and radical philosopher, William Goldwin and on August 1797, she gave birth to a daughter who would be known in history as Mary Shelley, the author of the famous novel Frankenstein. Mary Wollstonecraft would; however, die shortly after giving birth to her daughter and this would bring to an end one of the most exemplary lives led by a woman in the 18th century.

During her comparatively brief lifespan, Mary Wollstonecraft was able to produce a significant amount of a writings, which included some fiction, but also more importantly socio political treaties, which would question some of the fundamental aspects of her contemporary society. The best known among these, treatise is a piece titled A Vindication of the Rights of Woman which was published in 1792. And, this piece is widely regarded as one of the earliest tracts of modern feminism with it is main thrust being on the idea that, women should be put forward as rational subjects, women should be understood as rational subjects.

Now, we will have to come back to this idea of women as rational subjects later on, but before I do that I would like to briefly dwell on the qualifier earliest that, I have used to describe Wollstonecraft's a vindication of the rights of woman, I said it is one of the

earliest tracts of modern feminism. Now, if we are looking for treatise extolling the role of women in society within the context of the western world. Then the year 1792, we saw the publication of a vindication is actually rather elite date.

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Jane Anger
(1560 - 1600)

• *Protection for Women*
(1589)



Source: [GYNOCENTRISM AND ITS CULTURAL ORIGINS](#)

And for instance we already find a full, fledged polemic written in English and discussing the superiority of women over men, as early as 1589 and this was a tract that was written by one Jane Anger and it was published under the title Protection for Women. And, it makes this very interesting argument about Eve the biblical figure, Eve being better than Adam, because Eve was made not from the dust of the ground as was Adam, but rather she was made from the flesh and bones of Adam. So, she was better and purer than Adam.

Now, as is evident from this particular argument mobilized by Jane Anger to elevate the status of women, such early feminist texts that preceded Wollstonecraft's a vindication, we are all using various interpretations of the bible, to make their point. And, the bible in turn provided these early advocates of women's rights or women's superior within a society with a number of significant woman figures, whom they could evoke to make their argument starting from Mary the mother of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, who repented for her sins to Jesus.

The use of these Christian figures and the bible to promote the status of women within society is also understandable, because these tracts are being written, within the context

of a geocentric society. Where all major social and political arguments are god driven, but the spirit of enlightenment that swept through Europe, during the 18th century brought about a paradigm shift, divinity was replaced by rationality as the key argument underlying human social and political life and this ideological refreezing of mans position within the socio political matrix was most decisively acted out on the world stage in the form of two revolutions

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The ideological rephrasing of man's position within the socio-political matrix was most decisively acted out on the world stage in the form of two revolutions:

- The American revolution (1765 - 1783)
- The French revolution (1789 - 1790).

The first was the American revolution, that took place between 1765 and 1783 and the second was the French revolution, which started as we all know in 1789 with the storming of Bastille and then in the 1790's it went on to unseat the Borba monarchy.

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The revolutions produced two very significant documents:

- *United States Declaration of Independence*
- *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.*

Now, both these revolutions produce two very significant documents, the first being United States Declaration of Independence and the second being Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and both of these documents undermined, the earlier belief in a divinely ordained hierarchical society and established a new idea of mans pleas in the society based on principles of rationality.

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The *Declaration of Independence* asserts that:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

Thus for instance, the Declaration of Independence asserts and I quote, we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal that, they are endowed by their

creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Now, note here that, though the divine creator is evoked, the basic rights of man are regarded as self evident truths, this means that they are truths, that are understandable by the application of a common sense rationality and does not require any reference to the divine for justification. Mary Wollstonecraft with her treatise on the vindication of women's rights tries to intervene, in this changed scenario and she tries to foreground women not with reference to theology auto bible as was the norm before her, but with reference to rationality, she tries to place woman on the same platform of rationality that the contemporary discourse of human rights and political citizenship was placing man on.

So, in other words Wollstonecraft's a vindication can be seen as an attempt to extend the discourse of rights, which was otherwise centered on man on to the figure of the woman as well and this was a novel effort, which you know, we started what we understand as the modern feminist discourse. And this is why, I have referred to Wollstonecraft's of vindication as one of the earliest tracts of modern feminism.

Now, coming to the actual arguments contained in a vindication. Wollstonecraft asserts, that women by the virtue of being humans are as rational as men. And therefore, as much a claimant to not rights as men, if this status as rational subjects are at all denied or questioned then they are denied by men who do so, without consulting the women.

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“When men fight for their freedom, fight to be allowed to judge for themselves concerning their own happiness, isn’t it inconsistent and unjust to hold women down? [...] [W]ho made man the exclusive judge of that if woman shares with him the gift of reason?”

This in itself is a sign not only of injustice, but also of tyrannical irrationality; so, in Wollstonecraft’s own words, when men fight for their freedom, fight to be allowed to judge for themselves concerning their own happiness, isn’t it inconsistent and unjust to hold women down? Who made man the exclusive judge of that if woman shares with him the gift of reason?

Now, here Wollstonecraft does something very interesting, she does away with the question, whether women are rational or not? And in its place, she asks another question, which is who says women are irrational? And then she goes on to show that, any statement regarding women’s irrationality is itself made from a position that is inconsistent, that is unjust and that is not rational enough.

Wollstonecraft; however, argues that most women do appear to be ignorant lazy and irresponsible within society, but she argues that this is not, because of any inherent lack of rationality in them rather it is because, they are denied proper education by their fathers. And, because any exercise of their reasoning faculty is looked down upon by a society at large, which regards such exercise of the reasoning faculty as unfeminine.

Wollstonecraft’s suggestion is therefore, to completely overhaul the education system for women that would allow them to emerge as fully rational beings, who are at par with the men. But she is also aware that it requires more than the change of heart of individual patriarchs within the family, about the education of their daughters to establish women as rational beings.

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Wollstonecraft argues that both men and women were ultimately “educated in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society”.

This is because, Wollstonecraft argues that, both men and women were ultimately and I quote “educated in a great degree by the opinions and manners of the society”. And, the notion of femininity Wollstonecraft finds it too deeply rooted within the patriarchal society to allow women to emerge on the socio political arena as rational citizens

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Wollstonecraft advocates that the society itself should be radically transformed so as to “bring about a revolution in female manners”.

She therefore, advocates that society itself should be radically transformed. So, as to quote “bring about a revolution in female manners”, in the next lectures, we will see how this early pronouncements of women’s rights is rephrased. and rearticulated and indeed

rethought by later feminists of the 20th century. Feminists like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

Thank you for listening.