

# Reviewing the Development of Feminism in English Language Literature

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the development of feminism in English language literature from 19th to 20th century by investigating the developing explanation of feminism in English literary works. The main findings of this review are: 1) the emphasis of feminism has been shifting from women's rights in political areas to individual's daily life and the scope of feminism has been continually enlarging. 2) In the 19th century feminism is expressed in the context of the relationship between men and women. In the 20th century, feminism is delineated from the perspective of women's domestic life and familial value. However, later in the 21st century, feminism is becoming a theory isolating women from any kind of social relationships and portraying women's own feeling, experience and life goal. 3) Female feminism writers tend to write female characters who holds feminism thoughts bearing various kinds of temperament while male feminism writers' female characters in feminism literature used to be radical women; Female writers' characters are more realistic, always choosing to seek feminism within the social norms and compromising to reality while the female characters portrayed by male writers tend to be more idealized, breaking the rules and adhering to their own personality, often with a tragic ending; some female feminism writers express feminism idea through lesbian relationship or through women's own experience while male writers often discuss feminism in a heterosexual relationship. To conclude, feminism has becoming more specialized on individual's own life and experience from 19th to 21st century, which has covered more groups of people and social issues. The waves of feminism and the feminism literature are interacted and interrelated.

## 1. Introduction

There were three waves of feminism from mid-19th century to the late 1980s, and Feminism was defined in many articles. Halirova suggests that, according to Cambridge online dictionary, the definition of feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state" [1].

### 1.1 The First Wave of Feminism

The first wave of feminism occurred from the mid-19th to the early 20th, which mainly focused women's struggle to gaining their political power, especially their voting rights [2]. Walters states that: "if women's rights are not the same as those of man, what are they?" [3]. In Halirova's article, the author argues that in the first wave of feminism, the organized movements and clubs aiming for gaining women's equal rights as men emerged. One of the famous groups is Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) formed by British suffragettes the Pankhurst family [1].

### 1.2 The Second Wave of Feminism

The second wave of feminism movement refers to time period from the 1960s to 1980s. It can be also regarded as women's liberation movement. Compared to the first wave of feminism, the size of those women groups in the second wave were much smaller, and the focus was placed on particular issues, for example, the members of the group will share their personal experience and dig out the things they have in common [4]. The second wave movement chiefly focused on changing the society's structural inequalities related to an arrange of issues like reproduction, employment, sex

roles, and sexual violence, rape in particular [5, 6]. The second wave of feminism linked women's right in individual life to the collective political right, reflecting that "the private was of very public concern" [2]. In addition, there are two main fractions of feminism: one is called liberal feminism and another is radical feminism [2, 7, 8]. Liberal feminism aims to gain women equal rights as men within the already existed social structure, while radical feminism attempts to destroy and thoroughly change the social structure. Between two fractions, liberal feminism is more appeal to ordinary women. In the 21st century, liberal feminism is still a popular feminism theory. To summarize the above waves, the first wave of feminism tends to be more collective, which mainly focuses on gaining their rights to vote. 'Suffragette' is an organization which refers to feminism in the first wave to ask for their right to participate in the elections. Compared with the first wave, the second wave tends to be small groups, and females tend to become more individual to share with their experiences to discuss about the connections between gender bias and public lives.

### **1.3 The Third Wave of Feminism**

The third wave of feminism emerged in the late 1980s, which embraces individual differences, takes the issue of race, sexuality, class into account, and broadens the realm of feminism. The third wave movement aims to change gender inequity in daily life individually instead of initiating collective social campaign [9, 10]. It means that if individual states bias against women, the audiences would correct him in time, instead of raising another protest. People also discussed about gender equity in their daily life conversation. The body turns to be a vital location of feminism thought which is regarded as a place of modern social controls such as habitual rules like eating and dressing in a certain way [11]. Nevertheless, this sort of focus on individuals' freedom of choice serves mainly for white, middle-class women [12]. Also, since the third wave of feminism emphasized more on "personal acts of resistance" [9], less attention was paid to public areas around this time when the social structures and stereotypes continued affecting and oppressing women. Thus, the third wave has been criticized for depoliticizing the feminist project [13]. The third feminism also tends to be fragmented, with less collective, systematic groups to rebel against certain social structure or social rules conspicuously.

## **2. The Development of Feminism in Literary Works in the 19th and 21st centuries**

The Feminism literature from 19th~21st century can be an observation and testimony of the progression of feminism in this time period demonstrating the unique characteristics of each period.

### **2.1 19th Century Literary Works**

From the mid-19th century to the first half of the 20th-century, the first-wave of feminism emerged, which aims to "establish the legal policy that women are human beings and cannot be treated like property" [14]. Since gender inequality was severely inveterate in the 19th century when men in a superior and dominant position while women in an inferior and submissive place is part of social custom at that time. During that period, the feminism literature works often link to the political rights of women and emphasize that the biological differences between men and women even though there is no difference in intellect between two genders. In the 19th century, fictions written by feminist authors often focus on gender equality and women's independence through viewing the relationship between two sexes. Therefore, men play an indispensable role in the feminism of 19th century's literature works. In Charlotte Bronte's prestigious novel *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist Jane's independence and feminism is shown through her interaction with male character Mr. Rochester and many of her opinions towards women's born rights and qualities are expressed via the conversation of Mr. Rochester. Thus Mr. Rochester, or to be general, the male characters in the feminism literature of this time period serve as catalyst to nurture and develop the feminism theories or female characters. In addition, Jane's monologue reflects equal mental capacity, intelligent capacity between men and women, stating that women have full independence as well as the absolute control over their own life, which are women's birthright. As the monologue from one of the feminism books states: "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will." [15]. Another

feminist writer Virginia Woolf wrote “To Cambridge Women.” Woolf raised a question to public asking why there were no “female Shakespeare” while “any women in Shakespeare’s day should have had Shakespeare’s genius” and she also stated that women author should “wrote as women write, not as men write” [16]. Virginia contended the Bronte’s way of conveying women’s independence in the context where men were always involved; she argued that women should be able to write about their own experience without any men in the picture [17]. Also, Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* stated that woman “wants freedom from biological differences”.

## 2.2 The 20th Century Literary Works

In a comparative study, Nurhayati mentioned a drama *The Conduct of Life*, which delineates a marriage life of a housewife Leticia, a story simmered with repression, ignorance, physical and sexual violence and gender discrimination. In the drama, Leticia struggles to seek more appreciation and admiration from her husband Orlando, a lieutenant who always sexually and physically abuses her. Leticia’s desire to seek admiration from community and her husband, to be visible is a prototype of feminism opinion in 20th century [18]. Nurhayati also commented on another short story composed by Jhumpa Lahiri named *Interpreter of Maladies*. The story portrays the issue mentioned by Betty Freidan in the *Feminine Mystique* as “the problem that has no name” [18]. Because during the period after World WarII, the American media portrayed the ebullient and satisfied housewife image to public; the women appreciated by American media at that time were those who enjoyed doing housework and nurturing children. In response to that, Friedan wrote in the *Feminine Mystique* that women “adjusted to their role and suffered or ignored the problem that has no name; it can be less painful for a woman not to hear the strange and dissatisfied voice stirring within her” [18]. The feminism in 20th century literary works stress and alert people that the worst situation is when women perceive the gender repression as her destiny.

## 2.3 The 21st Century Literary Works

In terms of the literary works in 21st century, Nurhayati also mentioned a movie named *How to be Single*. The movie mainly talks about the way several single female characters live their life. The protagonist of movie, Alice, seeks to know who she is truly and to find more space for personal development, so she breaks up with her boyfriend and releases herself from all kinds of relationship [18]. In her single days, Alice realizes that she can do many things by herself through her interactions with the society, and finally she finds her own identity, starting to make her own decisions of how to live her life. The feminism expressed in the movie is in line with Virginia Woolf’s idea that women should write about women’s own experience without any link to men’s [17]. And the movie also reflects that modern feminism is tending to a more psychological direction that gender is a social construction instead of an issue related to biological differences or distinctions [19]. To be specific, gender role is maintained by people and there is a man-made rule that intentionally creates a gap between two sexes. And the goal of feminism in 21st century is to bridge the gap between men and women. This feminism theory is also demonstrated in the poem written by Rupi Kuar. One of her poem “Short tour and Farewell” states as follow:

“when my daughter is living in my belly  
I will speak to her like  
she’s already changed the world  
fully equipped with the knowledge  
that she’s capable of  
anything she sets her mind to”

This poem shows the post modernism theory [20], which states that gender is a social construction defined by repetitive actions rather than biological differences. In this poem, author expresses that women have as much value as men do and possess tremendous ability to many things as long as she makes up her mind to do so. The poem is written in women’s own self-identification and experience, claiming feminism straightforward rather than the literary works in 19th or 20th century which resort to relationship between men and women or familial bonds to express feminism. In Kuar’s another poem *Legacy*, the author shows that feminism is a theory that should be handed down from

generation to generation and its content should be continually studied and examined. The poem Legacy states as follow:

“I stand  
on the sacrifices  
of a million women before me  
thinking  
what can I do  
to make this mountain taller  
so the women after me  
can see farther”

The poem Legacy also expresses a sense of belonging and identity within the women group. And feminism is no longer a theory that should be discussed in a heterosexual relationship or devastating story of women who suffered from gender inequality. Advocating women’s rights for the equality of the sexes can be a profound and eternal ideology that can be passed down through generations, letting the younger generation carry on where predecessors leave.

### **3. The Different Views of Male and Female Feminism Authors on Feminism**

Halirova mentioned four authors: Charlotte Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson [1]. Among them, Thomas Hardy represents the male view of feminism, and the rest of three writers’ thoughts in their works demonstrate different explanations of feminism from different time eras under distinct social climates.

#### **3.1 Thomas Hardy**

Thomas Hardy, living in the time period in which the first wave of feminism occurred, delineated his feminism view heavily in his fictions. The female characters in Hardy’s books are always ardent and radical, holding the strong attitude of feminism and being provocative.

Taking the example of the protagonist, Bathsheba Everdene (the main character) of the Far from the Madding Crowd, Tess (the main character) in Tess of the d’Urbervilles and Sue (the main character) in Jude the Obscure are all portrayed as outspoken, vigorous and having the cutting-edge thoughts. Two main views are manifested in Hardy’s works [21] First, through his words, we can see that Hardy thoroughly refused to obey the fixed admonishment of the society then, he nullified the idea that the marriage should be the ultimate goal for women and also considered the financial issue over the marriage that he criticized women should not handle over all their property to husband when they get married “ It appears that ordinary men get married because taking one’s possession requires marriage, and likewise, ordinary women find husbands because marriage is not possible without possession; with totally differing aims the method is the same on both sides.”

Secondly, Hardy believed in women’s ability of self-controlling that women are strong intelligent and have capacity of being competent on work and amatory relationship at the same time as men are. Hardy strongly held the idea that both sexes have the ability to possess masculine and feminine disposition and bear the strengths and vulnerability of these qualities regardless one’s biological sex. In his view, Hardy thinks that the equality between men and women are the foundation of true love. He showed a radical attitude in his feminism novel that the stories he wrote often had a tragic ending. I would argue that the author regarded activities related to feminism as bloody revolution rather than a tender and gradual reform.

#### **3.2 Charlotte Bronte**

Charlotte Bronte lived in a period of first wave of feminism, during which women were still heavily oppressed, having limited rights and low social status. I would regard her as a representative of liberal feminism, although this term was created in the second wave of feminism. Through Bronte’s prestigious feminism novel Jane Eyre, it is interesting to see Bronte’s attempt to gain women’s equal rights as men without destroying the already existed social structure. At the end of the novel, Jane comes back to Mr. Rochester and marries him. In this situation, Halirova claims that the

sexual tension between Jane and Mr. Rochester is conspicuous that every time they hold conversations, they try to test each other and read minds [1]. I would regard this as an issue related to the psychological situation of being in a love relationship, instead of the relationship between two sexes. Being a feminist, Bronte advocated the harmonious relationship between two sexes, which is reflected through Jane's and Mr. Rochester's love towards each other. On the other hand, Bronte depicted Jane as a heroine breaking and ignoring the stereotype of women in the English society then. In the article *The Development of Feminism in English Literature of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, the author suggested that Jane was strong, rational, self-disciplined, having the ability to cope with the onerous and unfortunate events that happened to her [1]. In the description of male characters in her novel, Bronte held the same idea as Hardy that the admirable person should possess both masculine and femininity quality. And the character, Mr. Rochester, he is enigmatic, masculine and dark, but also is sensitive, kind and tender.

### 3.3 Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf, being strongly affected by modernism and as a pioneer of stream of consciousness. She mainly focused on women's experience and narrated from the mental states of female characters in her works. Compared to Charlotte Bronte, Virginia Woolf emphasized more on individual's complicated and eclectic momentous feelings; she criticized sexism and patriarchy existing in the society. In Virginia Woolf's novel, femininity is expressed more subtly and privately, and related to personal daily life. Halirova suggests that firstly, Woolf addresses the question for searching for self [1]. Thus, independence is in turn a main theme. For example, in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa chose not to marry her friend Peter Walsh whom she has been in love with since she was young because she was afraid of losing her personal space and independency. The second view of argues that in Virginia Woolf's works, the female characters always show ambiguous sexual orientation and sexual identity [1]. For example, lesbianism is emphasized in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. And there are depictions of Miss Kilman's masculine temperament which shows Virginia Woolf hold that women are borne to possess masculine and feminine quality at the same time as the two authors this review mentioned above, In Woolf's work, she shows a negative attitude towards the relationship between men and women: "It was not beauty, it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman or of woman together [22]."

In *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*, London: Woolf highlighted the agony and loneliness resulted from the sexual oppression and stereotype of her female characters. Thus, I argue that the lesbianism in Woolf's work, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, is not the result of the sexual desire, but of the sexual repression, the desire to seek understanding and comfort among female companions who have the same experience and the attempt to claim resistance towards men by seeking love and friendship within the women group. Thus, Virginia herself also denied that *Mrs. Dalloway* should be considered as a lesbian fiction, despite the protagonist show a sexual desire towards the girl of same sex. Different from Charlotte Bronte, the female characters delineated by Woolf is always in conflict with the society rather than with men. In Woolf's novel, she goes beyond femininity, or say, she broadens the boundary of femininity. Halirova argues Woolf shows her obsession with London society and people's behavior and criticizes the specious way of living of upper class, since many characters of her novel are the leaders of the society [1]. Like Clarissa Dalloway, the protagonist of *Mrs. Dalloway*, is depicted by Woolf that: "half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves, but to make people think this or that; perfect idiocy she knew for no one was ever for a second taken in" [22]. But Halirova claims that Woolf portrays Clarissa as a shallow woman as: "In the people's eyes, in the swings, tramps and trudge; in the below and uproar; the carriages, motorcars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich man, brass bands, barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aero plane overhead was what she loved; life, London, this moment of June. [1]" While I argue that in the deep heart of Clarissa, she is generally miserable for she knows she does not have strength and courage to rebel patriarchy society; thus, she diverts her attention to the superficial substances and trifles in daily life to seek alleviation. I can hardly attribute Woolf's opinion of

feminism to radical feminism, although she shows passive attitude towards the relationship between two sexes and the existed society. That is because Woolf's female characters often compromise on the social doctrines and keep living under the repression and sorrow. I consider this is in accordance with realism and the reflection of general women's choice and mental state. Although Virginia Woolf is a writer of stream of consciousness, her works hold less dramatic but more realism traits than Bronte and Hardy.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article aims at reviewing the development of feminism in English language literature from 19th to 20th century by investigating the developing explanation of feminism in English literary works. As time progresses, more and more people are involved in feminism movements: first women, then homosexual, finally men. There are three waves of feminism and each of them center at different aspects of feminism, using different approaches to fulfill feminism goals whilst carry on the former achievement.

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