

Feminism as Literary Criticism (Its Development, Figures, and Themes)

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Abstrak: Paper ini membahas tentang teori feminisme. Dalam bahasannya ditemukan bahwa ketika kita ingin mengkritisi atau menganalisa sebuah karya sastra dengan menggunakan teori feminisme, kita harus bisa memilih tema mana yang paling sesuai dengan teks. Artinya bahwa kita harus tahu lebih dahulu: siapa penulisnya; darimana asalnya; topik apa yang paling dominan dalam teks tersebut?; dan isu-isu penting lainnya. Dan juga karena kritik sastra feminis berkembang dari berbagai macam sumber atau perspektif seperti: sejarah, budaya, latar belakang biologi dan lainnya, para pengkritik juga harus membaca materi tersebut. Tetapi, menganalisa sebuah karya sastra tertentu juga membutuhkan suatu pendekatan tertentu misalnya, sebuah novel berbeda dengan puisi. Menurut Abrams (1981) ada beberapa pendekatan yang dapat diaplikasikan untuk menganalisa karya sastra; pendekatan mimetik, pragmatik, ekspresif dan obyektif. Ini berarti bahwa hanya dengan mengerti kritik sastra feminis tidaklah cukup untuk menganalisa atau mengkritisi sebuah karya sastra dengan sesuai.

Kata kunci: teori, sastra, kritik, gelombang feminisme.

Introduction

Women writers and women readers have always had to work 'against the grain'. Aristotle declared that 'the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities', and St Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an 'imperfect man' (Selden 1997: 121).

Cixous writes "as a woman, toward women ... women in her inevitable struggle against conventional man (Cixous, 1975: 245). It is man who has repressed women, made them afraid and ashamed, "led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs" (Aveling, 2003: 248).

Toril Moi, however argues that there is no automatic connection between the categories female and feminine: "though women undoubtedly are female – defined as a biological fact, this, no way guarantees that they will be feminine". So women should not feel inferior to men, they are actually equal to men in many things, and they have the same rights with those the men posses. Women should show the society that they can play roles like what the man do, especially in patriarchal society.

That is true, that one of our current major agenda to work on is to manifest the equality of the relation system between men and women, or sexual equality in society. It is what the so called 'feminism'. It really needs much attention, because up to now the women's role in our lives is still far

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left behind the men's. Actually some women do not like that, but among them there are still many, who do not realize that they are left behind.

Feminism fights for two things, which the women in general, do not possess. They are the equality of rights or rank with the men, and the autonomy to decide something which is best for them. In many aspects, women are inferior to men; they have lower rank than men in society. They are supposed to be *the second sex*, and in the decision making on many things, only men get more chances, women are forced to accept them.

Women, who are created to be a beautiful creature, are very often exploited; their beauty is just benefited to satisfy men's eyes. It can be seen on the advertisements of soap, shampoo, milk, and even cars and household tools. People, who watch movies, usually try to find something interesting or even exciting from women's sensual body, and many men do not like films which do not expose women's beauty and sensuality. In other words, up to now women's body has become the object of sexual commercialism.

Moreover, women do not have the rights or autonomy to make certain decisions; they are made to be dependent on men. This is really a tragedy of mankind, for those who are able to feel it. This is distressing too and it needs overcoming badly.

This phenomenon of women sexual commercialization can also happen in literary world, such as in; novels and short stories. In the novel, it is shown that the women figures become important just because of their beauty. It frequently happens that the author explicitly inserts, in his novel or short story, the description of women's sensuality. It is described that men characters try to fight for the beautiful figures, who become the main characters. Even the fight is finally conducted, just merely for the need of sexual desire.

A man character: loves a certain woman character just because she is interesting, beautiful, or even enticing, without paying any attention on the other important qualities, such as her inner beauty. In this term, the man just sees her outer beauty or appearance. It happens every where, not only in the Eastern but also in the Western literature. Many literary works are prepared for man readers, and woman readers are forced to read as if they were men. But, not all literary works are written in that way. Today, there are many literary works, which place women as people who are defended, freed from being subordinated, and given freedom or chance to decide their own interests.

Feminism is a movement for recognition of the claims of women for rights (legal, political, etc) equal to those possessed by men (Hornby 1962: 305). It covers many things concerning the women's life in society, either physically or non-physically. Other purposes are to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and literary criticism, in other words, feminist critics study sexual, social and political issues.

Seeing the clarification about feminism above, it is worth to discuss about it in this paper. But, since this paper is only intended to deal with literary theories, this paper will not discuss feminism in general, but only about *feminist literary theories or criticism*. Due to the limited time to have

more study or research on this field, it will only be discussed concisely about the definition of feminist literary criticism, the concept of reading as women, pioneers of feminist literary criticism including their views, and some themes of feminist criticism.

Discussion

a. The History of Feminism and Feminist Literary Criticism

There are some waves of feminism. Feminism in general of course having a long *political* history, develops as a substantial force in America and Britain throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage movements were the crucial determinants. That is the first wave. The figures of first wave are Woolf and Beauvoir. The second wave is to record the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, which in its revelation of the frustrations of white, heterosexual, middle-class American women – careless and trapped in domesticity – raised feminist issues as a on the national agenda substantively and for the first time.

The actual history of feminist criticism has fortunately been of a much quicker gestation. In 'Defining Feminism' Karen Offen (1988), states that 'feminism' began to be used widely in Europe as a synonym for women's emancipation only in 1880s. For example, the women's suffrage advocate Hubertine Auclert first described herself as feminist in her periodical *La Citoyenne* from 1882 and the first self-proclaimed 'feminist' congress in Paris was sponsored in May 1882 by Eugenie Potonie-Pierre and the women's group Solidarite. By 1894/95 the term had crossed the Channel to Britain.

Feminist literary criticism has developed in tandem with the women's movement. Although feminist criticism, like women's writing, might be said to begin with *Inanna*, a text written 2,000 years before the Bible before Homer – about the first hanged goddess who attacked sexual 'discourse' – feminist criticism was not recognized as a representative of intellectual endeavor in the academy until second-wave feminism (Humm, 1994: 2).

The second-wave feminism and feminist criticism came into existence rapidly in the mid-to-late 1960s. This was shaped and helped shape liberationist movements. Although second-wave feminism continued to share the first wave's fight for women's rights in all areas, its local emphasis shifted to the politics of reproduction, to women's 'experience', to sexual 'difference' and to 'sexuality', as at once a form of oppression and something to celebrate.

According to Yoder (1983), feminist *literary criticism* does not mean *woman critics*, it does not mean *woman criticism*, and it does not mean *criticism on woman writers* either. But more or less, feminist literary criticism means that readers should criticize a literary work or literature and with a special awareness, they should be aware that, there is sex which has relations to culture, literature, and our life in general. And this creates the differences between them including the differences on the *writers, readers, characterization*, and some other factors which influence the writing activities.

According to Humm (1986), twentieth-century feminist criticism, since the early years developed in a double if not multiple mode. One of the main achievements of Virginia Woolf was to show that literature read with a feminist eye involves a double perspective. First, she showed that since women's social reality, like men's social reality, is shaped by gender, the representation of female experience in literary works is gendered. Second, she showed that representations of women in literature, while not depicting innate characteristics of actual women, might disrupt the traditional symbolic order or language system of patriarchy.

b. Concept of Feminist Literary Criticism

One of the general boundaries feminist literary criticisms is stated by Culler (1983) that feminist literary criticism is, *reading as women*. It means that readers should be aware that there are important differences in interpreting a literary work among people of different sexes. So it means that men will have a different interpretation from women, when they read or criticize the same novel.

Showalter (1985) states that, up to now there are so many researches and scientific works which focus on the study of feminism. In *The New Feminist Criticism* it can be found interesting essays on that study. This book serves many essays which are important but controversial. Some essays on the books show various opinions about the study of contemporary literary criticism. If we observe it deeply, it is obvious that *feminist literary criticism* does not have enough qualifications to be said as a theory; it can only be said as an initial step or an approach. Something which is important to understand here is a sexual difference will influence the literary world.

Feminist literary criticism is different from the other criticisms. Feminist literary criticism develops from many kinds academic disciplines; so in this case, it is needed a wide perspective on the reading about feminism. The help of other academic disciplines is badly needed, such as; history, psychology, and anthropology. It also needs to take into account the available literary theories belonging to feminist critics. Linguistics, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Deconstructionists also help feminist literary criticism in their important analysis.

Gilbert (1989) discusses what the feminist critics want based on Freud's psychoanalysis. It is given back to the feminists themselves that is in their awareness; there should be a revision or improvement and a complete change in all ideas about the literary world. This criticism is not only for the works of women, but also for all writers, either women or men.

'Sex' is determined biologically, while 'gender' is a psychological concept which refers to *culturally* acquired sexual identity. In this case feminists have attacked social scientists that treat the culturally learned 'female' characteristics, (Millet 1970). She recognizes that women as much as men perpetuate these attitudes and the acting-out of these sex-roles in the unequal and repressive relations of domination and subordination.

c. Pioneers of Feminist Literary Criticism

Since feminism was popular in Western, feminist literary criticism developed as well. Humm (1986) mentions some feminist literary critics as

pioneers, they are: Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, , and Germain Greer. They discuss much about feminism so that, without observing it deeply, it seemingly does not have something to do with literature and culture. And these are some questions concerning feminism which come from those pioneers: What and who is a female? Why do many male writers describe females, in a wrong way? What is sexual politics? How is sexual politics described in literature? Why do some writers still consider females in that way, and why do females accept it?

All those questions seemingly are only discussions which can only be approached, based on cultural analysis. Those pioneers have the same vision on women; it is about the description of suppressive culture and women insult, in patriarchal society. They try to find and to prove the answers, in the study of literary works. They leave the traditional literary criticism in their discussion.

In the development of feminist literary criticism, the pioneers created a new form of feminist criticism, which is actually a mixture of culture and literature, because the four critics made thorough attempts to write a multigeneric feminist criticism by mixing arguments from biology, psychology and historical materialism, as well as literary critiques. And one of the great strengths of feminist criticism is its challenge to the boundaries of 'literature'. They compare females described by males to females described by women themselves. They focus their concerns and analysis on the females as described in patriarchal society, and the text is read as result of a patriarchal cultural system. Those pioneers see that, actually females' roles and status are decided or formed by sex. That is why Millet (1970): states *sexual politic* as a guide in sexual analysis. Millet takes into account texts in their relation to the writers' sex.

Why do they think that literary texts are important? It is understandable that literature is a cultural product, and it illustrates all social life. For example, a novel can be said as a cultural processes as well a cultural structure.

c.1. Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneer of feminism, in 1949, published a book about feminism, entitled 'The *Second Sex*'. Now it becomes a reference to study women's repression and construction of femininity by men. Beauvoir argues that society sets up man as the positive and women as a 'negative', second sex or 'Other', an insight in some ways analogous to Virginia Woolf's concept 'Women as Mirror'. Beauvoir's vision comes from the fact and the image of historical, biological, and psychological myth. The man-made myths put women as passive objects, they are created differently from men. According to Beauvoir, the physical differences between male and female, has a meaning only from the agreement of society so that biological characteristics can be explained, but it is never explained appropriately. Something worth to know from Beauvoir's view, is that implicitly. Female is never appropriately described by man writers, and the image of female is described as in the myth they have made.

c.2. Betty Friedan

Betty Friedan is an American journalist and a pioneer of feminism as well. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she states the pragmatic version of *The Second Sex* and shares the same focus: women's passive acceptance of the cultural stereotypes of femininity constructed by patriarchy. And the book is now regarded as a classic reference of American second-wave feminism which helped to inaugurate in the late 1960s. And as a founder and the president of NOW (National Organization of Women), Friedan is acknowledged to be one of the pioneers of the American women movement. Friedan uses criticism in her cultural analysis. Friedan (Humm 1994: 40) says that she has no theory, and implicitly suggests that the 'mystique' of suburban American woman stands for women's problems in general. But her basic premise is a belief that individuals can make free choices about lives and careers and that the social history of individuals is evolutionary and progressive.

c.3. Germaine Greer

Germaine Greer continued the idea of the former pioneers, in 1971; she published a book, *The Female Eunuch*. The book is arranged in sections which describe historical stereotypes of women all of which as Greer claims, poses characteristics of the 'castrate' – timidity, delicacy and perverted sexuality. There is a similarity between Greer and Friedan, because, like Friedan, Greer was widely read and had a clear impact on feminist thinking. They do not distinguish between different kinds of representations. Greer gives no materialistic or historical analysis; women are described in terms of contemporary cultural definitions of femininity rather than in relation to race, class or sexual preference. Historically, Greer and Friedan played an important role in second-wave consciousness-raising, but feminist criticism needed more complex and comprehensive theories.

c.4. Kate Millet

Kate Millet is different from Greer; she made a critique which is focused on the ideology. According to Millet, feminist literary criticism should be focused on *sexual politics*. She considers that literature is a document of collective consciousness of patriarchy. Again, according to her, (Humm, 1994) there are three charges in *Sexual Politics*: first, that male writers distort male and female characters; second, that they misrepresent sexuality by associating deviance with 'femininity'; and third, that the narrative structures of fiction represent the structures of masculine culture. Millet's reason is based on the notion that the political power men have over women amounts to a more fundamental political division than class. By sexual distinction, it can be interpreted how literature covers and creates sexual distinction ideology. This idea can be used to see the characteristics of femininity and masculinity in literary works written by males of females. She describes that, sex in textual structure is also like sex in society but it should be remembered that sometimes there is misreading.

Those pioneers have changed the old vision on feminism and literature to the new one; they have opened a new perspective about feminist literary criticism.

d. Themes of Feminist Criticism

According to Humm (1994), there are some major themes of feminist criticism, as follows:

d.1. Second-Wave

Feminist critics belong to the Second wave are; Kate Millet, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Germain Greer. They are fundamentalists because they try to find fundamental and universal explanations for the subordination of women in literary works. As it is discussed above, they address the sex caste system as represented in literature and culture. The four critics created a wide issue for post-war feminist criticism.

d.2. Myth Criticism

In the 1940s and 1950s many American women writers turned to myths as a means of redefining women's culture and history. That is why it is called *Myth criticism*. At that time, the definition of what prototypically feminine became problematic, so they turned to myth symbols to defy the traditional notions of feminine.

The main issue of feminist myth criticism is a refusal of traditional criticism's account of myth and gender representations and an attempt to find new literary vocabularies as often drawn in psychoanalysis. In the long run, myth criticism may be more important not to feminist criticism but to creative writing.

d.3. Marxist/Socialist-Feminist Criticism

Marxist feminist criticism focuses on the relation between reading and social realities, so according to Marxist, to talk about literature and life as two separate issues is meaningless. Marxist feminist thus combine the study of class with that of gender. Feminism personal identity is not seen as separate from cultural identity, in Marxist. Marxists are often attacked for understanding or misunderstanding the nature of quality in art. For them literary value is not a transcendent property, but something conditioned by social beliefs and needs. What is 'good' art for many Marxists is simply what people in a giving society agree upon as good.

d.4. French Feminist Criticism

French feminist theoreticians in particular, in seeking to break down conventional male-constructed stereotypes of sexual difference, have focused on language as at once the domain in which such stereotypes are structured, and evidence of the liberating sexual difference which may be described in a specifically 'women's language' (Selden 1997: 138). It means that language or writing is dominant here. French feminists aim to create positive representations of the feminine in a language which is often referred to as women's writing. All French feminism is influenced by Beauvoir's concept of the 'Women as Other'. Contemporary French feminists believe that feminine language is repressed – is itself the 'Other' of social and cultural speech, and it was formerly also Beauvoir's concept.

d.5. Psychoanalytic Criticism

There are many feminist critics belonging to psychoanalytic criticism, some are: Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Juliet Mitchel, Carolyn Helbrun and many others. A key focus of psychoanalytic criticism is on romance fiction. It is therefore, of particular value in analyzing textual repetitions and in decoding 'compulsive' literary strategies such as avoidance and subversion. Romance fiction can be read as a fantasy of women's repressed narcissism, and romance is a major category of the feminine image. Debates about romance fiction polarize between Marxist critics like Ann Snitow (1984), who feel (however sympathetically) that romance keeps women in their social and sexual subordinate place, and critics like Janice Radway (1983) who refuse this restricted notion of female false consciousness (Humm 1994: 128). Feminist criticism and psychoanalysis address common themes, they are; the psychic relationship of mothers, fathers and children, the relation between sexuality and its expression; the instability of identity shared by authors and readers.

d.6. Poststructuralism

'Structuralism' derived from the word 'structure', so it has something to do with 'pattern'. In this case *structuralism* means the science or critique, most concern to describe these systematic patterns and identity the structure of meaning in texts and how it operates through organized rules and conventions (Humm 1994: 133). *Poststructuralist* focuses on how literature and its language work within particular cultural and educational frameworks. In other words, it has made people aware of the ways in which men and women are absent from or included in representations, depending on who owns or speaks the language of representation. Foucault (Humm 1994: 135) locates the rules which control patriarchal/sexist linguistic definitions and terminology. It means that poststructuralist formulations are very appealing to feminist literary critics.

d.7. Black Feminist Criticism

It is called 'Black' because the theory or critique comes from Black people, such as from; Africa, African America and the Caribbean. Black feminist criticism intensively explores the traditions, history and culture of Africa, African America and the Caribbean. Black critics mostly focus on the spiritual energy of oral history, songs, crafts and gardens and representations of mothering. There are two close related questions or problems about black criticism, which are studied by Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Barbara Christian and African and Caribbean feminist critics: first, what the relationship between Black critics and writers and the majority of Black people and readers is, and second, what the relationship between Black feminist criticism and poststructuralism, postmodernism and academic theory in general is.

d.8. Lesbian Feminist Criticism

Lesbian means *homosexual women*. Many lesbians feel that they are neglected in society, and sometimes it is true that many people do

not accept them. Many normal people, women and man consider lesbians as the 'Other' in society.

Now, especially in modern countries, there is a movement like what women have done, 'Women Movement'. Lesbians now try to fight for their rights, (legal, politic, etc) equal to those possessed by the normal sexed people. Their movements are various, including in literature. And in the 1980s a configuration of feminist criticism took place which insisted on the important contributions made by lesbian literary women (Humm 1994: 214). One of the first, and the most influential, lesbian feminist essays was Adrienne Rich's 'When Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' which forcefully addresses key issues of visibility and invisibility and the need for a new literary tradition.

A major theme in lesbian criticism is the tension between identifying the 'real' nature of lesbian writing which is bound up with identifying a history of 'real' lesbian women. In literary criticism, lesbians' critics also have their own patterns of images, preferred genres and themes from which feminist criticism can challenge the heterosexist and homophobic assumptions of literary studies. But, since the number of lesbian critics is so small, people sometimes call it as a minor feminist criticism.

d.9. Third World Feminist Criticism

It is actually also a kind of 'movement', a movement undertaken by people (literary critics) from the third world. And it also happened because of 'neglect', critics from the Third World feel neglected by those from Western countries. This neglect took many forms. First the academy excluded most Asian and Black theory, criticism and creative writing (Humm 1994: 252). Second, the issues raised by Third World critics are often simplified; and finally, a very few Third World critics have been appropriated into a largely unchanged literary agenda. Third World feminist critics argue that it is impossible to classify Third World writing into traditional literary schools or movement isolated in some precise geographic and diachronic places.

Some countries taking part in the Third World feminist criticism are: India (Lakssmi Kannan), Latin America (Rosario Catellanos), Australia (Miles Franklin) and Hongkong (Rey Chow).

Third World feminist criticism focuses on three major issues: on the politics of universalism; on cultural controls and misrepresentations; and on the homogeneity of the canon. And Third World critics such as Castellanos, Anzaldua and Chow, by using many disciplines, by attacking Western ethnocentricity, by restoring plural subjectivities to literary history, have created the most provocative feminist criticism in the recent years.

Conclusion

Feminism continues to flourish in its many forms, and it will continue to offer society and literary studies a fruitful and exciting set of intellectual problems. Most feminists do not want to abolish male value; instead they wish to do away with such gender-typed categories altogether. Today, we

finally find out the unclear reasons why many young women who have benefited from the social gains due to feminist, but they still refuse to use the term 'feminist' to iconize themselves. Feminism, as a catalyst for so much of postmodern literary and cultural studies, will find itself transformed by its own creations.

Coinciding with the rapid development of 'feminism', many literary feminist critics appeared, such as: Betty Friedan from America, Simone de Beauvoir from France, Laretta Ngcobo from South Africa, Rosalio Castellanos from Latin America, Rey Chow from Hongkong, and many others. Along with the presence of many literary feminist critics, of course, the themes of criticism are various and abundant such as: French, Black, Lesbian, and others. So, when we want to criticize or analyze a literary work, by the theory of feminism, we should be able to choose which theme, match best with the text. It means that we should know first: who is the writer?; where is he/she from ?; what topic is dominant in the text ?; and other important issues.

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