

A Critical Evaluation of Feminist ideas in works of Literature from the 20th and 21st Centuries – A Study

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Abstract

Gender inequality, a social phenomenon based on feminist ideas, is one of the most contentious and perceptible. This research aims to expand on and compare how feminist ideas and gender inequality appear in diverse literary works, taking into account how literature may depict human existence as well as its ideals. It is necessary to perform a comparative literature research that is centred on feminist thoughts given the significance of feminism ideas and gender inequality in cross-cultural literature. This research looked at four different literary genres: play, prose (short stories), film, and poetry. This research combined the sociological feminism approach with comparative critique and content analysis techniques. This research analyzed how feminist ideas grew in acceptance and encouragement during the course of the 20th century. Several significant conclusions can be drawn from comparing literary works from the 20th and 21st centuries, including (a) the strength of feminism ideas grows with each passing century, (b) the binary oppositions of feminism and gender inequality are always present in literary works, (c) the existence of both feminism and gender inequality depends on human values and repetitive behaviour, and (d) the importance of personal and familial values in fostering feminism ideas.

Keywords: feminism; literature; comparative literature; gender inequality; comparative study

Introduction

Ideas, attitudes, and experiences abound in human existence, most of which have an impact on a person's mental and physical health. Literature is one kind of life reflection that individuals might use when they need to reflect on their experiences. Literature is a kind of human knowledge that demonstrates human existence. Although human existence is difficult to explain, it is simple to describe via literary works (Taum, 1997). According to Wellek and Warren (1977), who concur with Taum (1997), literature reflects and depicts a wide range of different facets of daily life. Their approach affirms the role of literature as a reflection of and expression of human existence. In a word, this idea contends that literature develops from actual social occurrences. In literature, the author conveys ideas to the reader via a particular type of work. According to Taum (1997) and Wellek and Warren (1977), literary concepts depict genuine human existence. It is important to remember that human existence is governed by values and beliefs. This is also consistent with the idea that culture shapes our values and beliefs, which have a big impact on how we live. The aforementioned ideals

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serve as direction in life to support and carry out activities (Knafo and Schwartz, 2003). It must be implied that literature may depict human existence in its whole with its true values. Values are formed by the beliefs of human groups at a particular time and location. The study of social occurrences, societal ideals, and even human cognition during a particular time or era may all be done using literary works as a tool. Gender inequality, which is a social phenomenon founded on feminist ideas, is one of the most contentious and perceptible social issues. This research aims to expound on and evaluate how feminist ideas and gender inequality appear in diverse literary works, such as in prose, poetry, theatre, and film, taking into account how literature may depict human existence as well as its ideals. Since it often results in oppressions of women, gender inequality has been a component of culture for hundreds of years. The concept that males are superior and women are inferior makes up the societal phenomena known as gender inequality. This notion is a component of the hegemonic framework known as the "gender paradigm." Even some cultures on the planet purposefully promote inequity between men and women. Through these deliberate or unintentional actions, gender inequality is becoming recognized as a significant societal phenomenon.

There is an intriguing defence of Hollander's proposal that gender is a social construction in post-modern feminism (2002). According to Judith Butler (1999). Her theory encourages us to think of identification as a signifying practice: gender is something we and, like other signifying practices, is based on repetition and actions that help the topic become culturally understandable. As a consequence, not only are identity categories like femininity acknowledged as variable and disputed (rather than fixed), but it also becomes feasible to subvert identity. Butler has clarified that her intent is to use a more constrained popular conception of performativity that demonstrates how gender is "contoured" via "repetition and recitation" and how this subversive "re-signification" of normative identities (Butler, 1999). Due to the fact that both feminism and gender inequality may be seen as social phenomena and both of them can be found in certain literary works, it is necessary to perform a comparative study of these two topics in light of the arguments and theories previously put out. Because the 20th and 21st centuries are regarded as the apex of change and the beginning of globalization overall, this research compares the traits of feminist ideas and gender disparity in literary works from both eras. Globalization might have an impact on all social phenomena, including feminism. The goal of the research is to identify feminism-related ideas in diverse 20th and 21st century literary works.

Research Methodology

This research looked at 3 different literary genres: play, prose (short stories), film, and poetry. The literary pieces that were used are all from various writers. There are four literary works:

- Maria Irene Fornes' 1985 play *The Conduct of Life*;
- Jhumpa Lahiri's 1999 short tale *Interpreter of Maladies*;
- Christian Ditter's 2016 film *How to Be Single*; and

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Feminism is used in this work as a method. The concepts of feminism and gender inequality are used as methods, while comparative critique is used as a methodology. Since human nature is universal across all civilizations, comparative criticism views literature as a global phenomenon that transcends national, geographical, and linguistic barriers (Justi, 2002). Comparative critique is important because it demonstrates the cultural values and contemporary ideals present in each literary work upon its first encounter with world literature, so enhancing human awareness or ethnic orientation. The awareness of the coherence of human mind is essential to comparative literature. One region in the planet may achieve this mental coherence. The ideas portrayed by a scientist, academic, or writer are the same ones that occur in another fashion in a different region of the globe (Akbari, 2007).

The second methodology used in this study, after comparative critique, is inferential methodology, often referred to as content analysis in qualitative research. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) claim that content analysis is a frequently used qualitative research method. In a traditional content analysis, the text data is used to directly determine the coding categories. A directed method begins analysis with a theory (feminist) as direction for the findings' interpretation.

The scripts for many literary masterpieces were mined for selected text. Feminism and gender inequality were the two main criteria used in the selecting process. The method of non-participant observation was used to acquire the data. In this method, scientists play a more passive role in non-participant methods and avoid interacting with the study's objects. The research items in this study are the texts that were chosen to symbolize feminism and gender inequality. The chosen text was collected, carefully read, and then analyzed using a feminist perspective and the comparative critique technique.

Results and Discussion

According to feminist theory, oppression of women may result from gender inequality. According to Katz et al. (2005), the concept of inequality has many different aspects. It is related to age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Women's oppression thus constantly coexists with ideas of feminism and gender inequity. These three social phenomena may be intertwined; thus, it is necessary to examine them from several angles. In order to give a thorough explanation and analysis of feminist ideas, gender inequality, and woman oppression in 20th and 21st century literary works, this research presents comparative critique for the aforementioned occurrences.

In The Conduct of Life by Fornes (1985)

In *The Conduct of Life*, Fornes (1985) paints a picture of married life that is influenced by domestic abuse, female tyranny, and gender inequity. In *The Conduct of Life* (1985), married characters portray feminism, gender inequality, and female persecution. The central topic of the story revolves on Orlando, the husband, and his violent actions. Orlando, a lieutenant in the play, has a propensity for abusing people physically and sexually. Leticia, his wife, and Nena, the little girl he kidnaps, are the

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ones who suffer as a result of his vicious actions. The drama depicts Leticia's desire for her spouse to show her greater appreciation. Leticia aspires to further her studies while experiencing a lot of violence from her husband Orlando in order to get more respect. In Scene 2, she discusses her husband's abusive behaviour along with her desire to be respected. 'He's deaf,' He is a creature. The only thing that affects him is sensuality. I cannot alter him. I want to learn. I want to know everything. I'm sick of being ignored. In college, I would have to do a lot of studying. I want to be a lady who talks in front of crowds and gets people's attention. Leticia's viewpoints and desires are illustrations of 20th-century feminist ideas. Feminist concepts were widely recognized in the 20th century.

"Interpreter of Maladies" Feminist Social Interaction Thoughts (Lahiri, 1999)

The values of various writers vary. In many literary works, feminism and gender inequality are depicted in a variety of ways. The topic of Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri revolves on the housewife, the primary female character, experiencing indirect domestic tyranny. The primary female character, Mrs. Das, has no issue expressing her wants to her husband, her children, and even to a complete stranger, like Mr. Kapasi, who works as a tour guide for her family. However, Mrs. Das also experienced indirect tyranny from her husband and her family. Her comments about marriage may indicate that she has lived in an environment where her requirements for social connection have not been sufficiently met. Mrs. Das shares her life narrative with her tour guide throughout their conversation. She explained her marriage process to Mr. Kapasi. We were married when we were still in college, she said. Living in the same town as our parents were their close friends. I believe it was mostly a setup (Lahiri, 1999, p. 26). Her complaint implies that she didn't choose to be married at such a young age. She is forced to do all of her wifely duties after her marriage, but her husband is unaware of how oppressed she is by the decisions of her family and her domestic responsibilities. The main female character in this narrative suffers indirect tyranny as a result of her family's and her husband's ignorance. As a result, it falls under the category of family or domestic oppression. Inequality, as previously noted by Katz (2005), has a variety of aspects. Anywhere, at any time, inequality and its result, oppression, may occur. Additionally, Mrs. Das describes in the narrative her harsh existence. She claims that having a kid so rapidly and breastfeeding while her spouse was at work overwhelmed her after marrying so young. Her spouse never seemed angry, stressed, or chubby as she had after the birth of the first child, but she is always exhausted and left alone at home with the child (Lahiri, 1999 p.26)

How to Be Single: Feminist Personal Development Thoughts (Ditter, 2016)

As was said in the preceding section, literature is one technique to depict many facets of people and society. This claim is confirmed by Qasim et al. (2005), who said that literature may serve as a mirror of social events occurring in a certain age or historical period. Feminism and gender inequality may be seen in how female characters are portrayed in literature since writing can be a mirror of society. In this way, analyzing feminist ideas and gender inequality requires an understanding of how society views women and how women present themselves as individuals. The 2016 film How to Be Single has

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a number of female characters. The primary female character, Alice, and all the other female characters are all single. This film shows how a single female character manages to live her life even though she is often depressed, confused, and lonely. The main character, Alice, initially had a partner, but she subsequently chooses to stay alone in order to have more room for her own growth. "I claimed I'd do things all the time, but I never, ever do them," the woman complained to her lover. I often say I'm going to do something, like learn to cook, take a self-defense class, or trek the Grand Canyon, but I never, ever do it. I must understand who I am by myself. At least once, we must experience what it's like to be single. It is clear from Alice's comment in the preceding sentence that she wants to know who she actually is. She hopes to discover herself by briefly disengaging from all relationships. In the contemporary world, a woman has the legal freedom to live her life as she pleases, independent of her spouse or her family. In order to discover herself via single life, Alice also wishes to remain free of all relationships for a time. This indicates that she wants to be recognized as a unique person with her own ideas, desires, and way of living. This kind of independence could be inaccessible to women in earlier generations who were tied by marriage and family law. As long as she is unmarried, it is clear that women today see themselves as autonomous individuals who are not constrained by any family or romantic duties.

The study suggests that the primary character, Alice, is meant to represent many issues and their solutions in the life of a single woman. The movie's primary female character's motivations are consistent with Butler's postmodernist feminist theory from 1999, which holds that gender is created by habitual behaviour and that there are several types of femininity. According to Butler (1999), gender is a function of behaviour repetition, therefore both femininity and masculinity may be modified and challenged at the same time. According to Butler's (1999) assessment, how solitary women behaved in this film precisely mirrors the evolution of feminism. The main female protagonists in this film are all single women with professional jobs, and although they all have various feminine traits from one another, they all nevertheless see their personal growth as being more essential than their romantic relationships. This is significant evidence that gender is, in fact, a social construction based on exposure to certain repeating behaviours. The repetitious behaviours may be seen in a variety of contexts, including formal employment, intimate relationships, online dating, and more. These consistent behaviours influence both individual beliefs and societal paradigms about how women should conduct their lives on their own, free from the influence of repressive patriarchal ideologies.

Conclusion

Women's oppression, gender inequality, and feminism are all multifaceted societal issues that cut through cultural, social, family, and personal norms. All of the literary works in this research demonstrate how gender inequity, feminism, and the oppression of women are intertwined. Based on the previous discussion, it follows that (a) feminism thoughts have been growing stronger with the passage of time, (b) feminism thoughts always oppose gender inequality as both are binary oppositions in literary works, (c) both feminism and gender-inequality live through values, (d)

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personal and familial values are important for the development of feminism thoughts and gender-inequality, and (e) that the current state of the world is a feminism-free zone. According to Banarjee (2005), socialization has a significant effect in the formation of gender role identity, or the extent to which individuals believe that the qualities they exhibit correspond to conventional gender norms (Bem, 1993). Finally, it has become abundantly clear from this study that literary works may accurately portray society as a whole, including human values and behaviours that are created and influenced by gender disparity and feminism.

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