

“Survey of Influences of Marxist Literary Theories on Feminist and Post-colonial Movements/Writers”

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Abstract: Gender studies are one of the most recurrent themes in twenty-first-century literary debates and scholarly conferences. The recurrence of the theme accounts for the world's intent to move forward for more inclusive approaches to address social matters. This being said, feminism finds itself to be an effective mode of expression for women and their advocates. Many forms of feminism have contributed to the debate but one of the most effective ways to defend women's cause and nurture the ongoing debates over the issue is found in the field of literature. As such, this theoretical and critical article provides a survey of the concepts and movements of feminism that have become predominant in literature. The paper covers key facts of influences of Marxist theories on feminist and postcolonial movements/ writers showing a broad picture of reality. It takes into account poignant issues that feminist writers across Africa, America, Asia, and Europe have addressed. The paper comes up with the conclusion that these controversial debates have blended many theories and ideologies backed up by Marxist philosophy to uplift the social conditions of women.

Keywords: feminism, Marxist theories, literary theory, literary criticism, post-colonial movements/writers, gender issue.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century is marked by a turning point in literary history, which has given birth to many trends in the field of literature. Indeed, several theorists such as Marxists, structuralists, and post-colonialists have made diverse but significant contributions to the study of literary theories. According to some Marxist critics, they have contributed to literature to the extent that 'they validate the experiences of marginalized or underprivileged groups in society such as women, minorities or non-western and overall third world writers, etc.' Zoila Clark's [1] comments raise awareness on the subject matter:

In 1975, when Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" became a feminist manifesto for the women's movement, she coined the term *écriture féminine* to describe her literary approach. This embraces the idea that women need to find their own way of writing in order to hear their voice and break free from the kinds of linear scientific thinking which is rooted in masculine pleasure and modes of creation (p. 2).

For Karl Marx, the founder of the doctrine, the main focus on the notion of equality and class struggle is to challenge power structures and advocate socialism. In this regard, Terry Eagleton, a great Marxist scholar asserts in his *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1987): 'Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and the practice of forming them, and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver the story of struggles of man and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression.' (Preface, vii)[2]

Much of these Marxist concepts is based on Georg Lukács's thoughts which, somehow, consider literary history as 'a march towards socialism'. This is a perception of literature as a means of struggle against domination. Thus,

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Marxists have tremendously influenced feminist and post-colonial movements/writers from around the world. It is in this perspective that these movements have been propelled to address women's plight in various areas of politics, humanities, and social sciences, etc. In this regard, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most renowned specialists of the issue asserts:

In many different societies, women, like colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of 'Other', 'colonised' by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions for a male-dominated canon (p.249). [3]

These scholars catch the attention of the public on current debates over issues that hit women. The latter are considered to be victimized by some political and cultural practices. To this end, this paper attempts to address those issues employing a critical and theoretical approach that connects to various developments of the concept of feminisms. In the process of my analysis, I will first provide a summary of the types of feminism with a historical background, then discuss some key influences on feminist and post-colonial movements/writers.

I-Synopsis of the forms of feminism and historical background

Feminism is a broad term that means many things. Thus, attempting to analyze it is tantamount to covering many issues that overlap from one way to another. Indeed, there are many forms of feminism, but in my work, I am only interested in the most common ones in literary studies. As such, I refer to the organization We Rise created by Movement Builders for Movement Builders which has provided concise and precise definitions /explanations of the various forms of feminism.

First and foremost, We Rise mentions '*Liberal Feminism*' focussing on 'its works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women's suffragist movement'. [4] This form of feminism goes along with the ideals of first-wave feminism. The philosophy that prevails within it is women's liberation. Therefore, its ideals echo the views of pioneers such as Mary Wollstonecraft (author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792) and the American Margaret Fuller (author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 1845). However, this one is not as tough as '*Radical Feminism*' which 'questions societal systems such as patriarchy and sexism.' In fact, the followers of this movement assume that these phenomena are the roots of women's oppression. This form of feminism can then be related to women's struggle in civil rights movements.' (Cf. We Rise)

Next to the above-mentioned concepts, one can highlight '*Black Feminism*' which, according to We Rise, rises as a 'school of thought, which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity, and racism are inextricably bound together.' Hence, the birth of the concept of *intersectionality* that looks into relating each of these issues.

A key concept of my study is '*Marxist and Socialist Feminism*' which shows how 'Feminists, grounded in Marxist and socialist analysis, attribute women's oppression principally to the capitalist economic system where global corporate power prevails.' (Cf. We Rise). There is also '*Transnational or Global Feminism*' which is 'an approach to feminism concerned mainly about how globalization and capitalism affect people across nationalities, races, ethnicities, genders, classes, and sexualities and has reinforced a range of global movements' (Cf. We Rise).

Last but not the least, literary theorists also find interest in '*Visionary feminism*' which, We Rise considers, can be mostly found in the many writings of African-American feminists. 'This form of feminism combines the need to challenge patriarchy, class, race and other forms of oppression such as imperialism and corporate control' (Cf. We Rise).

The main Marxist concept that has strongly influenced feminist literary movements is Karl Marx's belief in 'class struggle' meaning the fight against domination and oppression. This view has been broadly shared by feminists as a landmark in the history of their literature. The idea conveyed hereby is the fight for equality and emancipation. As Marx and Engels considered that 'it is one's economic identity that determines his or her economic position in society' [5], feminists in their turn take it for granted and claim a status that is different from the fragile and non-significant one they have. To this end, they condemn and fight against all kinds of male domination in their literary productions.

From a literary but also historical perspective, it is important to mention that it is the second-wave feminism advocates, hugely influenced by the French writer Simone de Beauvoir, who have, in a broader sense, made the debate gain more currency. They not only claimed women's emancipation but also deprecated male domination, 'horrible' cultural practices, domestic violence through patriarchal systems and questioned harshly the term 'woman' itself. The

movement arose in the USA in the early 1960s and spread over in the next two decades until it reached a larger scope of its claims. This is the reason why I deem it not necessary to insist much on first-wave feminism whose focus was suffrage particularly women's rights to vote.

In this vein, I am more prompted to make comments on Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949). This book is of paramount significance in the study of feminist literary theories since it is referred to by Judith Thurman as the 'feminist bible'. Thurman penned the introduction to the English version of Beauvoir's book originally published in French under the title *Le second sexe* with thought-provoking comments on the pioneering work. She argues: '*The Second Sex* has been called a "feminist bible," an epithet bound to discourage impious readers wary of a sacred text and a personality cult. (Introduction to Beauvoir, 1949: 11) [6]. One can infer from the terms 'feminist bible' that much responsiveness is expected from readers to seize the content of the book that accounts for a 'genesis' of twenty-first-century feminist movements/writers.

The philosophical depth of Beauvoir's book is also testified by its translators' notes :

The Second Sex is a philosophical treatise and one of the most important books of the twentieth century, upon which much of the modern feminist movement was built. Beauvoir the philosopher is present right from the start of the book, building on the ideas of Hegel, Marx, Kant, Heidegger, Husserl, and others. (Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier's notes on Beauvoir, 1949: 19)[7]

In the light of the translators' comments, Beauvoir's thoughts prove to be essentially grounded in the ideals of both nineteenth-century philosophers, Marx and Engels. The latter's theory and conception of society are mirrored in Beauvoir's thesis mostly when she argues that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature /.../ which is described as feminine'(p.111).[8]

Beauvoir's views resonate with Marxist thoughts. She strives to radically debunk the thesis according to which man and woman are different. The following passage from the first chapter of her book, 'biological data', tries to justify her position on this poignant societal matter:

Males and females are two types of individuals who are differentiated within one species for reproduction purposes; they can be defined only correlatively. But it has to be pointed out first that the very meaning of division of the species into two sexes is not clear (p.41). [9]

What comes out to be understood in these developments is that Beauvoir condemns civilization and social norms severely, which she believes has contributed to the marginalization and subjugation of women. For her, these are evils that have caused women to become 'the second sex'. Such a position not only sensitizes women but also rebels against social norms and calls on the responsibility of the other sex which she believes is at the origin of the misconception of 'weak sex'. This dreadful consideration of women, through the eyes of Beauvoir, appears with an interrogative and aggressive tone in the first lines of her *The Second Sex* :

I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new. Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over: let's not talk about it anymore. Yet it is still being talked about. And the volumes of idiocies churned out over this past century do not seem to have clarified the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? True, the theory of the eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, "Even in Russia, women are still very much women"; but other well-informed people—and also at times those same ones—lament, "Woman is losing herself, woman is lost." It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold. "Where are the women?" asked a short-lived magazine recently (p.23).

Beauvoir's writings build upon Marxist theories and nurture second-wave feminism as well as feminist Marxist literary criticism with indelible marks. As such, the doctrine gains ground and spreads over with views that somehow rest on the social and cultural backgrounds of writers or theorists.

II-Marxists' influences on feminist and post-colonial movements/writers

The Canadian writer and critic Margaret Atwood is a telling example of influenced feminists. The work of this prolific post-colonial and post-modern writer but essentially a feminist critic has been significantly credited in the area of gender studies. The comments of Wynne-Davies (2010) testify to her renown in the field: 'Atwood's works encompass a variety of themes including gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and "power politics"[10].

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is probably her most topical work on the issue. This novel turns out to be critical of the American capitalist system and blames the very system for being the root of the matter that hits women. She tries to show it by depicting the Republic of Gilead as a fake one that only weakens and exploits women and finally destroys them as mere objects. Indeed, this novel conveys second-wave feminist ideals and enriches feminist criticism as well. Andrejka Obidič has conducted attention-grabbing research on this Canadian writer pointing out that feminist experience may depend on the cultural and social background:

Atwood became of age as a writer in the second half of the twentieth century when Canada, as a post-war independent state, was still struggling with the missing national identity owing to its colonial (i.e. cultural) subordination to the former British Empire. In addition, its colonially conditioned mentality was gradually evolving from cultural into economic and political subservience to the fast-expanding capitalist market of the American superpower. Concerned with this national problem, Atwood greatly contributed to the theorizing of Canadian identity in the 1970s by writing a controversial literary and critical study *Survival*, published by the House of Anansi Press in 1972, in which she presented the typically recurring themes of Canadian literature because she wanted to prove to the skeptical Canadian readership that Canadian literature had its own literary tradition and, according to her, it represented the expression of Canadian identity (p.07). [11]

This typical form of writing is quite normal because the ideology and experience of female writers are what mostly influences their literary production. So, Atwood has not missed the point. Obidič shares many details on this prolific feminist critic and literary figure, author of eighteen novels and other genres:

In Atwood's novels, however, her female characters no longer appear in such secondary roles, but are usually active heroines who, metaphorically speaking, struggle to survive the double colonization since they are still victimized by the North American postcolonial patriarchal society of the twentieth century and oppressed by their domineering partner, with whom they struggle for power in the battle between the sexes (p.9)

Worthy of note in the cultural background of feminist writers is the famous Asian American Maxine Hong Kingston, a graduate from The University of California Berkeley, USA. This Asian woman writer of Chinese origin is extremely passionate about feminist literature. She is first influenced by the writings of the great American Renaissance figure Walt Whitman, then by the renowned first-wave feminist Virginia Woolf.

Kingston has marked the Asian American literary tradition with the publication of her autobiography *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* in 1976. It recounts the experience of Chinese immigrants in the USA. The story can be situated in the intersection of gender oppression and racial discrimination. This autobiography is relevant to the study of *intersectionality* in that it openly expresses Asian American feminism. This view is shared by Shuang Hun who argues that 'throughout *The Woman Warrior*, it is very obvious that Kingston tries to employ western feminist ideology to rebel against the patriarchal Chinese American society. She writes about the silent and victimized Chinese women, whose tragic stories result from the patriarchal Chinese culture' (p.28) [12]. This idea is also supported by Zoila Clark who clarifies to readers that Kingston has been influenced by the thoughts of Helene Cixous: 'Kingston is successful in abiding by Cixous' principle to the extent that she takes evasive action against losing her own mind and her independence of mind saves her from the insanity that overcomes Moon Orchid and Pee-A-Nah. In so-doing, Kingston manages to write her self' (p.6). In a nutshell, Kingston remains a powerful voice among Asian American feminists.

In the USA, one of the key feminists to acclaim in this survey is the contemporary African American writer Alice Walker, an avowed feminist who coined the word 'womanism'. Walker has hugely marked third-wave feminism. According to Purdue Online Lab, this current 'borrows from post-structural and contemporary gender and race theories to expand on marginalized populations' experiences' [13]. Purdue Online Lab also points out that writers across the third world and Africans, in particular, consider Walker a reference in the subject matter. Her reflections spark heated debates among feminists in the USA as well as in Africa.

For Purdue Online Lab, 'Writers like Alice Walker work to "reconcile feminism with the concerns of the black community and the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialog and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform." As such, it is important to clarify that Walker herself has been influenced by Zora Neale Hurston, an avowed feminist and civil rights activist that she refers to as a role model and literary idol. Indeed, Walker can be situated in the category of 'visionary feminism'. She uses her black community to convey her views of feminism. She has impressed the late 1990s and early 2000s African and African American writers. Her novel, *The Color Purple*, also adapted to the cinema, exposes racial issues from a feminist perspective. Yasemin Aşci and Sibel Nenni have made interesting remarks on her masterpiece:

In her book, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker realistically reveals the difficulties a black woman experiences in a patriarchal society. Like many black feminist writers, to Walker, being a black woman requires to face many different challenges. Because for a black woman, the only problem is not to submit to male domination, to her all men around, including her family members, mean the same danger. A black girl starts to recognize a completely different face of the Earth from the moment she was born. Even his father and brother are the ones she has to struggle with. The best example of this becomes clear at the entrance of the novel *The Color Purple*. Celie who is a black girl is raped by her father and he uses force so that she will not share it with anyone (p.38). [14]

It is important to mention that this form of writing predominates in post-colonial feminist literature. This is no surprise insofar as the main issues denounced by second-wave feminist writers and political advocates are comprehensively exposed to the audience for critical readership. Yasemin Aşci and Sibel Nenni highlight the point in their common paper: 'To Post-colonial feminists, gender oppression is the primary force of patriarchy. They object to the portrayals of women as passive and voiceless and the portrayal of women as modern, educated, and empowered. Post-colonial feminism emerged from the gendered history of colonialism.' (p.38). (Cf. Aşci and Nenni)

Feminist ideology is the backdrop of the writings of a range of prominent female literary figures in Africa and in America. Still in African American literature, the writings of Toni Morrison are illustrative of the point of 'visionary feminism'. Morrison's literary career is crowned by prestigious distinctions of which the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 is the top. Ron Charles's testimonial makes interesting parallelism between Walker's and Morrison's works and views regarding the subject matter:

If Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) romanticized the harmonious culture of women in opposition to the contentious world of men, Paradise emphasizes that theme in bold italics. But Morrison is less intent on condemning the brutal, self-centered men in her novel than examining the way a history of instability has made these men fear the creative, unorthodox power of women. [15]

Charles raises a common issue in both African American writers. The novel by Morrison that he hereby compares to Walker's *The Color Purple* is the one that follows *Beloved* which won the Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison's *Paradise* provides readers with a realistic picture of women in a male-dominated world. This is the reason why Morrison's work is oftentimes reported to be too sad in terms of tone, which is also a good literary strategy for her to properly play her role as the voice of the voiceless. In Charles's own words, his reading notes of *Paradise* about the issue can be summarized in these lines: 'Much of the novel tells the sad, sometimes shocking ordeals these young women endured in a misogynist world before finally stumbling upon this room of their own.'

From a historical perspective, there is a direct link between these African Americans and their African counterparts. This fact is manifestly shown in the way African female writing too is replete with Marxist feminist ideas. The works of Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, respectively *So Long a Letter*, *Second Class Citizen* and *Nervous Conditions*, to name but a few among them, can be read from the same perspective. These prominent francophone and anglophone writers have bolstered the Marxist concept of equality insofar as it has to do with social class struggle. This is particularly what enthused the Nigerian feminist writer Buchi Emecheta to portray women in her novels as 'second class citizens' to stigmatize male domination in patriarchal societies and also question some cultural practices. This is somehow a reality that prevails in African patriarchal societies.

In this context, 'class struggle' has urged feminists to put forward their concept of gender issues which they try to apply to the theory of Fiona E. Leach (*Social Science*, 2003): 'The term sex and gender are not interchangeable. One is biologically determined and the other socially determined. Sex is an easier term to define than gender, being the biological difference between men and women. Only women can give birth and only men can produce sperm. ... gender is a culturally relative term derived from the social sciences.' [16] By this, African feminist writers become influenced by Marxists simply because they agree on Marx and Engels' thoughts: 'economic identity determines one's position in society.' Therefore, they claim there should not be any discrimination against women.

African women writers find that Georg Lukács's theory is instrumental to their struggle. They consider literary productions as a reflection of 'social realism', which means in their concept a way of depicting society in a multi-faceted approach. Tsitsi Dangarembga's writings are an illustrative case. This Zimbabwean writer uses social realism to portray women's matters in her novel *Nervous Conditions*. In this fictitious work, she tries to build a powerful female character through Tambudzai and Maiguru as a reproduction of the real-life experience of her society. This is the reason why critics can easily notice in her style a certain tone that catches the attention of male readers. Tambudzai's avowal is reminiscent of the issue: 'I was not sorry when my brother died (p.1).' [17] Such a testimonial can be interpreted from different perspectives, but the one that fits best here is a feminist perspective in that the rationale behind the story is women's empowerment. Because the female character that says such a

thing did not have the same chance as her brother Nhamo who was sent to school very early to have access to education and build a bright future. Alas, the little boy dies and has finally to be replaced by her sister. This is for the writer a strategy to give a picture of what is going on in patriarchal societies in which women have less chance than their men counterparts.

As for Mariama Ba, the francophone and Senegalese writer, her *So Long A Letter* is acclaimed as a masterpiece in African literature. It is probably the most read novel by an African female writer with over 15 translations in different languages in the world. The story recounted in the novel unfolds in an epistolary form; hence many conversations and correspondences of the female protagonists Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. The latter epitomizes women oppressed by cultural practices and traditions. Subsequently, many of the gender issues that the author exposes are unraveled through the arguments of these characters. From a religious perspective, some realities are relative and may not be considered weird as regards social and religious norms because any interpretation depends on the position or lens that the reader chooses to decipher the message of the text. However, the tone that imposes a feminist review to critics can be seized through the authorial voice that Mariama Ba gives to her thwarted female protagonist and adjutant. This is characteristic of her feminist views *vis-à-vis* traditional African societies. Among other issues, Ba denounces the practice of polygamy, arranged marriages, and the denial of inter-caste marriage, which is typically a form of violence against women.

Considering all these issues dealt with and the huge efforts made by women writers to shape their world, feminist literary theories have reached the climax particularly with the writings of the famous American critic Elaine Showalter. As a contribution to the debates over the years and the theory of feminisms, Showalter introduced a new concept called *Gynocriticism*. She developed the concept in her *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. *The Oxford reference* provides a broad definition and elucidation of the concept:

A term introduced by American feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter to classify critical work such as her own which focuses exclusively on literature written by female authors. Its twofold aim is to recover 'lost' or 'neglected' women writers and to understand in its specificity women's construction of textual meaning. The term is not widely used today, but the two key examples of gynocriticism, namely Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), are still read today, so the practice of gynocriticism, if not the word, is very much alive." [18]

Through this form of critical gender approach, Showalter calls into action for the denunciation of gender stereotypes and men's domination. Readers are mostly acquainted with her thoughts through *Thinking About Women*. This groundbreaking work is a strong call to action as Elizabeth Stevenson points: 'Mary Ellmann's book, *Thinking About Women*, is a diatribe against a stereotype. She is evidently subtly and humorously against all stereotypes and might have wittily written against the concept of *the Jew, the New England, the Negro, the Southerner*, but instead she inveighs against the woman, or rather what various fine minds have written on the subject' [19]. This form of criticism has urged new female writing to develop a certain code and mode of thinking that is specific to women scholars. Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975) is a good reference of the kind. In a word, this type of criticism dedicated to women's literature claims to be a strong form of expression that not only fights to identify and address feminine subject matters in the female literary world but also to mark its history by going beyond the reach to found a female literary tradition. Hence, many scholarly works or conferences nowadays address such concerns as a way to sustain gender issues and women's studies.

CONCLUSION

To wrap up, Marxist literary theories have been instrumental to the development of feminist literary movements. Even though the various feminisms diverge, to some extent, in terms of ideology or claims, one can in a way or the other, find many points of convergences. The main facts to retain in feminists' struggle are the questions of liberation, emancipation, and women's empowerment, which accounts for factors of a common denominator of these diverse feminisms.

Whatever the perspective one tries to give to feminist claims, it is important to know that such a fight could not be very easy as it is not only a worldwide issue that concerns both men and women as human rights activists but also a controversial ongoing debate that moves scholars. This is the reason why misinterpretations as well as misunderstandings occur oftentimes and lead to some confusion considering the issue a simple fight between man and woman. This confusion has become more than a trend nowadays; hence, radicalization has been noticed in some movements that consider themselves to be more political than literary. Regardless of their divergences, feminists value Marx and Engels's principle:

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so-called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another (p.32).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned polemics and controversies over the issue, scientific and objective arguments have been shared in the ongoing debates. Consequently, people come to realize that one of the most interesting and challenging reflections have arisen in the field of literature, which introduces the literati to the development of feminist movements. Credible scholars and female literary icons have been studied in this survey which has shown, to the best of my knowledge, key facts that stand for the breakthrough and challenges of feminist literary theories. At the outcome, what seems to be the most shared vision and ideology of feminists lies in the social class struggle with supportive arguments of the Marxist theory of 'social realism'.

The eradication of male domination over women and oppression prove to be central to the claims of feminist post-colonial movements/writers who try their best to challenge patriarchal societies and appalling cultural practices that affect women. The consequences of this phenomenon are that women are conceived in these societies as objects and are victimized by male subjects. Nonetheless, in terms of discrimination and marginalization, one can infer that both men and women of the Third world have experienced them but differently. In other words, Third-world men writers did not fail to show in their literary productions a certain hegemony of western cultures that hits both sexes as a common experience even though women remain the most affected group.

Competing interest

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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