A Critical study of Feminist Realism in Modern Fiction¹

By
Dr. Said A. Abou Deif
Lecturer of English Literary Criticism
Faculty of Arts, Assiut University

“Research serves to make building stones out of stumbling blocks.”
Arthur D. Little

Introduction:
This study is a theoretical investigation of feminist Realism in modern fiction of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. My intention is to draw some innovative textual conclusions out of the context of their novels to prove their radical feminist implications. What distinguishes these two writers and their novels is a particular kind of fidelity to reality which is not different from their feminist visions. Thus, feminist realism is extensively studied and elaborated through the works of those two writers. The patriarchal realism (social realism) and female reality is scrutinized to explain the difference between the world as men have constructed and the reality that is lived, imagined and expressed by women. This explanation will serve to generate a critical language with which to approach the fictional texts in this study. Then, the idea of feminist realism is further defined and developed with reference to patriarchal realisms.

In addition, a discussion of some of Virginia Woolf’s novels

¹ This article is published in the Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts: Assuit University Press, January 2003 V0.14.
and D. H. Lawrence’s is mentioned to draw conclusions on feminist realism in literary criticism. The central figures in those works are taken as examples of radical critique of patriarchal realism. In recalling the forgotten female powers will invoke the possibility of feminist realism.

1. Feminism in Literary Criticism:

The emergence of the feminist movement is considered one of the most important developments in the history of literary criticism. Feminists, in their earlier theories, were preoccupied with the images of women characters and how these images are represented in literature. According to the feminists such literature denies the essential selfhood of women and treats them as merely others not as subjects, as it reflects the values of the patriarchal society. Then the focus is shifted to the idea that women as writers were silenced. One of these important arguments that highly preoccupied the feminist critical stage for a long time is whether female writers did not reach the literary standard of male writers, as their patriarchal society did not allowed them to do so; or they actually reached that standard, but their works were not evaluated in an adequate way. Since the evaluation of the works of female writers in terms of male traditions is not the goal of the feminists, they seek to scan the products of female creativity in order to find their own language. From that point emerges
“Gyno-criticism” which concentrates on the analysis of women’s literature through new models based on the study of female experience aiming at unveiling female tradition. According to Elaine Showalter, the one who introduced the term of "Gyno-criticism", (1997:216-224) there are many gaps and disruptions in the history of women writings since most of their works were not evaluated. She argues that men, unlike women, can perceive the world more deeply, and as a consequence their impact in literary tradition is much greater and influential than that of women writers which vanishes more easily.

Since the late 1960s feminist criticism has become more sophisticated, and has branched off into different critical theories such as: liberal, Marxist, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, postmodern, and radical theories. But all these different theories fall under a general umbrella, since they all agree that society is wholly patriarchal. All feminists agree that women are not born but they are made by the society in which men dominate everything because they are thought to possess the qualities of domination and power. Feminism in Literature starts with some sort of evaluation to the female writers according to the traditions of literary criticism of the male critics. Fraya Katz-Stoker (Cornillon: 1973:321) in her article "The Other Criticism: Feminism vs. Formalism” expresses the criterion of feminist
criticism. She believes that feminist critics evaluated modern critical approaches with the same attention to contextualization. She blames formalism for allowing critics "to study literature as a privately created world completely independent of its social and political context" (321). For formalist critics, "the words literature, poetry, and art conjure up images of bubbles floating in a cloudless, Platonic sky" (316). "Feminist criticism," Katz-Stoker says, "is a materialist approach to literature which attempts to do away with the formalist illusion that literature is somehow divorced from the rest of reality." This critic explains that the absurdity of that reality "cannot be corrected until it is perceived" (326). However, another important feminist critic is Adrienne Rich, a mother of four children, working at a job, and keeping house, she wrote during bus rides from work or in "the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake" ("Silences: When Writers Don't Write," (Cornillon: 1973:110). Rich also pointed to her own experiences: she was a daughter writing for her father, a poet learning her craft from male poets, a mother writing while her children are feed, a woman who thought the choice was between love and self-importance. In her article "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich (1979:18) declares that the act of seeing text and life "with fresh eyes," was more than a feminist critical method; it was "an act of survival". A
radical feminist literary criticism would take the text as a clue to "how we have been living," "how our language has trapped as well as liberated us," and "how we can begin to see--and therefore live--afresh" (18). The point was "not to pass on a [patriarchal] tradition but to break its hold over us" (19). The term "materialist feminisms" is known which proves a contentious interest in the issue of whether women's interests can, or should be tackled in terms of traditional socialism and Marxism. In the United Kingdom, Juliet Mitchell’s essay "Women: The Longest Revolution" (1966) started the revision of traditional Marxism by explaining the position of women in terms of psychoanalytic theory of sexuality and gender. Twentieth-century women were belittled for their portrayal of female experience, while male writers were admired for "their ruthless appropriation of life for their art", (Rapone 1973: 400). Thus, Carol Ohmann (1971:909) discovers that reviewers who assumed Wuthering Heights was written by a man attributed power, originality, and clarity to it, while those who knew that Emily Bronte is the author considered it an interesting addition to the tradition of women's novels in England. Ohmann concludes that there is a "considerable correlation between what readers assume or know the sex of the writer to be and what they actually see, or neglect to see, in 'his' or her work". So many critics admitted that this novel is a
masterpiece when they thought that it was written by a man and they were shocked when they knew that it is written by a woman. Annis Pratt, (1971:877) in her article “The New Feminist Criticism”, thinks that there are four steps to realize the feminist criticism: rediscovering women's works, "judging the formal aspects of texts", understanding what literature reveals about women and men in socioeconomic contexts, and describing "the psycho-mythological development of the female individual in literature". Then, Lillian Robinson (1971: 879) adds her definition to the new feminist criticism saying that "Feminist criticism" should be "criticism with a cause. . . . It must be ideological and moral criticism; it must be revolutionary". It must take care of the interest of literature and of women. Concluding her essay, Robinson declares what is considered as a turning point for this theory: "I am not terribly interested in whether feminism becomes a respectable part of academic criticism; I am very much concerned that feminist critics become a useful part of the women's movement. . . . In our struggle for liberation, Marx's note about philosophers may apply to critics as well: that up to now they have only interpreted the world and the real point is to change it" (889).

However, Tania Modleski's important book Loving with a Vengeance (1982), which represents a conscious feminist critique of psychoanalysis to explore romances and Gothics
aimed at female audiences. Janice Radway's ethnographic “Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature” (1984); and Meaghan Morris's “The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism” (1988) have helped open up the study of popular genres to politically sophisticated feminist analysis. At that point an example has to be mentioned, Elaine Showalter, a pioneer feminist critic, expresses in her article "Women Writers and the Female Experience" that women writers had been forcibly alienated from their experiences. She says that Nineteenth-century women were prohibited from writing anything related to femininity and were scolded for doing so. Showalter is increasingly willing to talk about various schools of feminist theory. She finds the social theory of Marx useful to criticism in "Feminist Theory in the Wilderness." In "Critical Cross-Dressing," she is not sure about the ability of prominent male critics to turn women as readers without surrendering "paternal privileges." What she fears is that "instead of breaking out of patriarchal bounds," they will merely compete with women, failing to acknowledge women's feminist contributions (Showalter 1985:143). She includes feminist aesthetics and French feminism in the introduction to her edited collection The New Feminist Criticism: Essays in Women, Literature, and Theory and begins talking more about men through the category of
gender in her later edited collection *Speaking of Gender*.

Feminists believe that the question of gender is a question of language. The relationship between gender and language does much to characterize the approach of a group of feminists who draw upon the theory of post-structuralism. This feminist work takes as its starting point the idea that gender difference exists in language rather than in sex. In emphasizing language, however, these feminists are not suggesting a sort of linguistic or poetic change into a world made only of words. Rather, language intervenes so that "materiality" is not taken to be a self-evident category, and language itself is understood as radically marked by the materiality of gender. The poststructuralist focus on language thus raises fundamental questions that extend beyond matters of usage. The understanding of writing and the body as sites where the material and the linguistic intersect requires the interrogation of woman as a category of gender or sex. The poststructuralist feminist attention to language and materiality has provoked an extended argument over the meanings of "gender" and "sexual difference." Joan Scott (1988: 28) explains that gender denotes "a rejection of the biological determinism implicit in the use of such terms as 'sex' and 'sexual difference'". Materialist feminist literary critics focus on key problems in
language, history, and ideology. In addition, they focus on critiques of the gendered character of class and race relations under international capitalism. The importance of these critical positions and developments for feminist literary theory and criticism arises from their foundations in political theory, psychoanalysis, and sociology rather than from traditional literary concerns with questions of principle, form, genre, author, and composition.

2. Virginia Woolf’s Feminism:

Woolf’s art and human sensibility is seen as a great modern innovation and an important feminist debate. She belongs to Bloomsbury Group of the 1920’s. Woolf (1940:18) in her Dairy says “Man is no longer God”. Her first novel Night and Day (1919) represents the fight to get the feminine vote; it is the experience of the suffragist movement. Night and Day has often been compared to Pride and Prejudice. V. Woolf herself acknowledges the debt women writers owe to Jane Austen. In Mrs. Dalloway (1925) Woolf reveals the experience of her own neurosis. She narrates her inner feelings through her novel. The reader is aware of that part of her life. The author explains the finest treatments of the problem of loneliness and love as in To the Lighthouse (1927). This book is a fine example of the best use of language that is considered by many to be the
finest women’s style. Woolf also talks of style, imagery and symbolic relations. The lighthouse is the ivory tower. A male symbol but in Woolf’s writing is a combination of male and female. Later in *A Room of One’s Own* this idea of ivory tower will be tackled. Woolf handled the feminine experimentation in this novel and also in *The Waves* and *Orlando*. According to Jane Moore from Cardiff in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) “you can be seduced by the language”. Women have a special interest in the question of style. Women’s style is seductive. *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) are central to feminine literature and criticism. The author makes herself as an outsider, she is a traditional woman. It is about women and the fiction that they write. It is a work of ambiguous nature; truth and fiction are mixed. Although it is hard to make a conclusion about this topic, because sex is a problematic issue. Feminine creativity and literary tradition are present in the novel. Woolf asks: Why not invent “human intercourse”?

Feminine literature and criticism are discussed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). *Orlando: a biography* (1928) is known as a historical novel about literary criticism. It is based upon impressions and monologues. *Orlando* like *Jacob’s Room* is dominated by the voice of the narrator. In it we read about Addison, Boswell, Sir Thomas Browne, Pope, Swift and Tennyson in a satiric way. Woolf is worried about
the dialogue between males and females. The main character of this novel has a special interest in her own sex. The novel emphasized the ambiguous sexuality and as a conclusion the book is divided in seven sections: death, love, poetry, politics, society, sex, and birth.

Virginia Woolf offered the most important literary-critical model to feminists who are interested in recovering the experiences of women writers. New women’s need for self-expression leads to the breakdown of their relationships and may lead to Woolf’s descent into madness and death. Female tradition now reclaim, these rooms provide the space and inspiration necessary for moral and philosophical enquiry and, finally artistic activity. This text gives an account of the frustrations that a fiction female writer must go through to arrive at a theory of women and fiction. Woolf imagines historical woman writers in their social contexts and searches for the sources of bitterness their works. Actually, Woolf revalues the negative qualities that Freud attributes to women and turns them against the patriarchal order which produced them. In Art and Anger, Jane Marcus (1988: xiii) examines most of Woolf’s works and she declares that "the texts under discussion in relation to their historical context, as well as to a problematizing of the issue of reading by gender gained from reading Virginia Woolf's fiction". She identifies Woolf as a socialist feminist and has
collected work on her mystical aspect, women in her contexts, and revising views expressed in the family biography by Quentin Bell. Marcus resists the contemporary hierarchy that privileges language-centered Deconstruction. She argues for the importance of studying the production of a literary work in process and identifies that "the tradition of making the art object," rooted in daily experience, as a feminine aesthetic. Like Lillian Robinson (1978) in *Sex, Class, and Culture*, Marcus asserts the importance of Woolf’s radical feminist work *Three Guineas*. The American feminist critic Elaine Showalter said that Woolf’s techniques are not those of logical or rational argument. Showalter says, “I think is important to demystify the legend of Virginia Woolf”. It is possible to detect the influence of Freud on Woolf’s understanding of the human mind. Woolf is accused of playing with her audience.

Thus, Woolf introduces female characters who are very powerful and understating of their identities. She explains her points of view regarding the abilities of women to express their feelings and to act according their literary creativity and their own gender. Woolf introduces female characters who are aware of their own problems and try to reach some sort of solution to these problems as in the examples of Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse.
2. D. H. Lawrence’s Feminism:

Lawrence remained in England during the First World War because of his weak lungs, which kept him out of the army. As a result, he witnessed the social evolution. He watched women become much more independent and powerful during the war. Although he was unsatisfied with women’s new social role, he explores many independent female characters, and portrays them all differently. D. H. Lawrence’s England, was the turning point in the feminist movement. Lawrence’s expectations of modern women, and his inevitable disappointment, provide the theme of Hillary Simpson’s *D.H. Lawrence and feminism*. She continues the theory of Kate Millett about Lawrence’s feminism.

As Hillary Simpson (1982:62) explains that the motivation for the women’s movement was largely economic, for "a highly industrialised nation faced with mass conscription of its active men had no choice but to look for an alternative labour force, and the employment of women was the obvious answer". It seems that Lawrence’s feminist critics are capable of looking at him with an open mind. Kate Millet discusses "The Woman Who Rode Away," along with other works, in her 1970 book *Sexual Politics*. In it, an unnamed female character escapes white society in search of American Indian spirituality only to die in a
ritualistic sacrifice. Millet portrays the story as an exploitative and sadistic work. According to Millet Lawrence "fudge the meaning of the story by mumbling vaguely that it is all allegorical and symbolic." (377)

In "Monkey Nuts" Lawrence presents a new type of female character, Miss Stokes, who is one of the most independent and powerful women Lawrence develops. Though a feminist critic might try to show how Lawrence abuses Miss Stokes in the end of "Monkey Nuts" by showing how Joe finally escapes her desires. Miss Stokes certainly does her share of abusing Joe. As a young "land-girl" doing what was considered man’s work before the war, she is confident enough of herself. Stokes is able to force a strong, 23-year old soldier into a relationship. The soldier, Joe, is powerless to resist, "I’m not keen on going any farther--she bain’t [sic] my choice" (Lawrence 372). Joe tries to avoid Miss Stokes, despite her being young and attractive. Yet Miss Stokes is able to win out, and only the help of the much older Corporal Albert can break Joe out of his problem. "Monkey Nuts" is a story in that Miss Stokes, upon her realization that she wants Joe, she tries to bend him to her will. So Lawrence seems to feel that a woman can have just the same power over a man as a man might over a woman.

In "The Fox" Perhaps Lawrence felt that some people,
both males and females, are born as "foxes" while others are victims, born to be dominated. Let us consider Banford and March from Lawrence’s novella "The Fox." They live in a tiny attempt at a sort of a utopian society, Banford as bookkeeper and March doing the masculine farm work. While Banford lacks some of her femininity, March keeps hers, and is very attractive despite doing dirty, hard labor and wearing a man’s work clothes. The farm to Lawrence is a sort of laboratory to do experiments to examine the possibilities inherent in women’s new social role. What would the world be like without men? Of course, Lawrence cannot really consider this question alone--it would hardly make for an interesting story. So he adds another subject. How will these new types of women behave in the real world? Perhaps the attack of the fox on their hen house represents the return of men to England following the war. It is something that both Banford and March have difficulty dealing with, so March, having the fox in her sights, is taken by its male power and is unable to kill it. The situation is changed by a young boy, who is much like the fox that he kills. He kills Banford by felling a tree on top of her and forces March into a marriage in which he is very much the dominating male, with March learning "her place" as a female. The female is certainly dominated by the male in what could indeed be called a "twisted, sadistic fantasy." The
boy’s feelings at the end of the story claim that the male attitude focuses on female submission to the male. In The Fox, the male hero is again much younger than the female, a situation that certainly in Lawrence bears parent-child implications. Henry Grenfel must strongly struggle those overtones in his relationship with Nellie March. And so he simply dismisses March's objection that she is old enough to be his mother, although, in fact, she is not; but even in his own mind, he must insist on his priority in a way that protests a little too much: "[he] was older than she, really. He was master of her “(Fox, p. 23). In the final novella of the volume, The Ladybird, there is a curious inversion which is related, I believe, to Lawrence's childhood illnesses and dependence upon his mother. The severely wounded male protagonist, one of Lawrence's little dark men, who has been likened to "a child that is very ill and can't tell you what hurts it" (Fox, p. 163) and himself feels that he has lost his manhood as a result of his dependence, heals himself and "cures" the nervous unease of the Sleeping Beauty figure, Lady Daphne.

A remarkable short story from the volume England, My England (1922) may serve to illustrate the dynamic through which the mother-child paradigm becomes displaced, in this case, unto a married couple, in such a way that the displacement symbolically threatens the self-
integrity of the male protagonist. In "The Blind Man," Maurice Pervin has returned from the battlefield of Flanders to his wife, Isabel, scarred and completely blind. They are able to achieve a generally satisfying relationship that is, however, stained by occasional attacks of depression on his side and an annoying feeling of weariness on hers. When Isabel's old friend Bertie Reid, a bachelor, comes to pay them an extended visit, the feminist problems come to the surface. The two men dislike each other, and Maurice feels isolated to the point where he draws back to the stable and his animals for the feeling of warmth and security which he experiences there. Isabel sends Bertie out to check on Maurice, and the story ends sadly. Maurice touches Bertie's face and head and asks Bertie to touch his scarred face in return. The result is a feeling of happiness for Maurice and sadness for Bertie.

"The Blind Man," like so many other stories of roughly the same time, obliquely but clearly expresses Lawrence's denial of his own illness and his belief in a spiritual strength beyond any mere physical weakness. However, the relationship of Maurice and Isabel has begun to founder on Maurice's dependency on her, an entirely reasonable one given the circumstances. One might posit an oedipal constellation at work when Maurice, upstairs changing, hears Isabel and Bertie talking and feels "a
childish sense of desolation"; he "seemed shut out--like a
child that is left out." (Howarth: 1968:229) But there is
more to it than that, for it is clearly a feeling of dependency
rather than jealousy that distresses him: "[He] had almost a
childish nostalgia to be included in the life circle. And at the
same time he was a man, dark and powerful and infuriated
by his own weakness. By some fatal flaw, he could not be by
himself; he had to depend on the support of another. And
this very dependence enraged him" ("The Blind Man," p.
66). The narrative strategy that Lawrence uses to solve the
tense situation he has set up is ingenious both fictionally and
psychologically. In effect, when Pervin lays his hands on
Bertie Reid--whose own inadequacies have been described
in terms of an "incurable weakness, which made him unable
ever to enter into close contact of any sort" ("The Blind
Man," p. 68), especially with women--he is able to transfer,
as it were, his own feeling of childish dependence unto the
guest. As a result, it is Bertie's self-boundary that is
destroyed: "He could not bear it that he had been touched by
the blind man, his insane reserve broken in. He was like a
mollusc whose shell is broken" ("Blind," p. 75). In a
dynamic something like that of the original function of a
scapegoat, Maurice Pervin seems to have overcome his own
vulnerability by transferring it onto another person. While
Lawrence clearly would like to think of himself as a Maurice
Pervin, overcoming mere physical disabilities, he must fight against the barely acknowledged fears of a psychological collapse like that of a Bertie Reid (as the fact that Lawrence as a boy was known as "Bert" might suggest). In *Women in Love* (1920) Lawrence describes a record of deep and passionate desires; this novel records the lives of two sisters and their lovers. The couples’ passions are set against the chaos of World War I. “Ursula, don’t you really want to get married?” opens the book, which poses questions of love, passion, and desire. Lawrence introduces two lively and individual women characters. The narrator also captures the subtleties hidden within the prose, and describes the two women’s growing awareness of sensuality with delicate intimacy. In fact, in Lawrence's *Women in Love*, there is an intellectual depiction of each character's relationship with others. Truly, these relationships include a significant amount of bonding. Moreover, there is a type of womanly bonding between the characters of Ursula, Gudrun Hermione and Winifred. This bonding creates a certain intimacy between the two women; however, they soon become detached from each other reminding us of the differences in nature and the separate individualities of the women in *Women in Love*.

In short, *Women in Love* is based on human relationships; it is interested in describing a type of bonding
that occurs, especially between the women. However, in some cases this bonding becomes quite detached, causing a feeling of cynical struggle towards the other. Through examining the relationships between Ursula, Gudrun, Hermione and Winifred, Lawrence introduces some sort of womanly bonding and he exposes their feelings when they are separated. When Lawrence says “I hate sex, it is such a limitation,” he is concerned with the unequal sharing of gender. Sex is the most promising way of escaping this “human, all too human world,” yet it fails to offer enough elevate. Thus, Lawrence’s fascination with distinguishing between good sex and bad sex is the distinction between the blessed and the disrespectful. Finally, Lawrence manages his characters to present his ideas of feminism and he presents these ideas in some sort of confrontation between his male and female characters.

3. Conclusion:

The primary purpose of this paper is mainly to highlight some of the main concepts that are related to Feminists thought. The focus is on feminist realism in modern fiction, with special reference to Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. Some of their works had been scrutinized to prove their feminist allegations. The research tries to dig deep to see how those two revolutionary writers express the
feminist ideas in their works and how they develop their characters to explain ideas related to the feminist points of views. Virginia Woolf proved her points of view through her female characters that are dominant in her works and she expressed their feelings and loneliness in an exquisite way. Woolf wants to verify that women writer have their special ways of expression in talking about women or talking about man/women relationship. Woolf introduced very powerful female characters that affect their relationships with each others and with their male characters.

In addition, Lawrence’s works are mainly talking about women and their feelings towards other women or towards other male characters. Some may argue about the nature of feminism in Lawrence’s works, but the analysis of his short stories prove his ability of talking about women’s feelings in different situations and from different points of views. The analysis of his works from different periods deserves the serious consideration of critics. The study clearly shows that phallic realism and realist feminism are an extension of Western culture facilitated by capitalism. Lawrence’s works transform his notion of feminist realism. Shaw (200:24) explains:

What emerges as most obviously interesting about Lawrence’s relation to feminism is the extent to which it changed from a pre- war
interested and guarded encouragement to a final intense hostility in which feminists were seen as ‘absolutely perverse’ and the future of the race despairingly depended on the self-sufficiency of the phallus with women’s role that of sacrificial acolyte.

To conclude, this research article tries to reach the core of feminist realism through a theoretical introduction about this literary phenomena related to literary criticism. It also introduces two important fiction writers, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence to represent modern fiction writers and to present their critical views of feminism. The research needs more elaboration to cover all the literary writings of those two important literary figures.
Works cited

Cornillon, Sausan Koppelman. Ed. 

Howarth, Herbert. 
(1967-68) "D.H. Lawrence from Island to Glacier," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXXVII.

Koedt, Anne. Ellen Levine; Anita Rapone ed. 

Lawrence, David Herbert. 


Lodge, David. Ed. 

Mitchell, Juliet. 
(1974) *Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Woman's Estate*  
Marcus, Jane.

Modleski, Tania.

Marcus, Jane.

Millet, Kate.

Ohmann, Carol.
(1971) "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics," College English 909. College English 32 (May 1971, special issue on women in the profession

Pratt, Annis.

Rich, Adrienne.

Robinson, Lillian.

Showalter, Elaine.


Scott, Joan Wallach.

Simpson, Hillary.

Shaw, Marion.