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*Commonalities and Divergeances between
Feminist and Marxist Literary Theories*

Azzouz Amina

¹ Maghnia University Centre (Algeria)

a.azzouz@cu-maghnia.dz

ABSTRACT

Marxist and feminist literary theories have become well-known frameworks for examining literature from an ideological and social critique perspective. A comparative theoretical analysis was conducted using primary texts and critical literature from both traditions to show that ideology, power, and marginalization are major issues in both Marxist and feminist views. Despite having differing focal points, Feminist and Marxist literary theories provide complimentary critical instruments for comprehending how literature upholds or subverts social systems. By promoting multifaceted textual criticisms and illuminating the intricate relationship between gender politics and economic processes in cultural production, their intersection enhances literary study.

Keywords: Feminist literary theory, marxist literary theory, gender, class, ideology

INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism offers a diverse range of viewpoints for analyzing literature, each shaped by unique theoretical foundations and societal concerns. Among the most important of these are Marxist and feminist literary theories, which aim to reveal and challenge the power dynamics present in both literature and society. Marxist criticism focuses on issues of class, labor, and economic disparities, while feminist criticism centers on gender, identity, and the representation of women. This article explores the feminist and Marxist perspectives in literary criticism, highlighting their similarities and differences, as well as how each framework influences our understanding of literature and its societal significance.

The main goal of this research is to explore the fundamental principles, areas of agreement, and differences between Marxist and feminist literary theories, and to evaluate their effects on literary analysis and societal critique. In this process, the study seeks to demonstrate how these theoretical perspectives not only enhance our comprehension of texts but also confront prevailing ideologies reflected in literature .

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, comparative approach, scrutinizing selected literary works through both Marxist and feminist lenses. By utilizing these theories on specific examples, the study shows how each perspective uncovers distinct aspects of power, oppression, and resistance present in literary narratives.

1. Feminist Literary Criticism and the Creation of New Methods of Reading:

Feminist perspectives on literature provide a compelling and transformative critical framework for readers to explore how gender, power, and identity are shaped and depicted in literary works.

In addition to criticizing how women are portrayed in literature, feminist literary theory aims to fundamentally alter how texts are interpreted, comprehended, and appreciated. "A political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" is what Toril Moi defines as feminist criticism (Moi, 1985, p.117). It acknowledges that reading is a socially and culturally informed process that has frequently been influenced by patriarchal norms rather than a passive act. Judith Fetterley contends that "to be immasculated is to be educated to think as a man, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a

masculine system of values." (Fetterley, 1978, p. xii) revealing how deeply embedded male-centric ideologies can be in the act of reading itself.

Therefore, feminist critics aim to reinterpret literature in ways that emphasize gendered power relations, give voice to underrepresented groups, and challenge presumptions that are often taken for granted in both texts and critique. As Annette Kolodny writes, feminist criticism aims to "call into question the assumptions underlying existing critical practices" and "expose the gendered biases within the literary canon" (Kolodny, 1980, p. 1). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, emphasize the necessity of uncovering the "anxiety of authorship" experienced by women writers navigating a male-dominated literary tradition (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 51). Therefore, feminist literary theory aims to rethink the underlying structures that underpin the creation and consumption of literature, not only to promote inclusivity. As Elaine Showalter explains, feminist criticism "is not merely a revision of male-authored texts but the construction of a female framework for the analysis of women's literature" (Showalter, 1981, p. 131).

The ultimate goal of feminist literary theory is to change literary criticism as a field, not merely critique current approaches. Feminist theory broadens the scope of literary interpretation by questioning long-held beliefs and creating new approaches. It advocates for a more moral, politically conscious, and inclusive reading culture that honors a range of viewpoints and experiences. This dynamic and continuous change reflects how feminism has changed to adapt to shifting social, cultural, and scholarly contexts.

2. Marxist Literary theory as an interpretive approach:

Since society and literature are intertwined domains that impact one another, criticism of all kinds generally holds that every piece of art should be interpreted in light of the social, cultural, and historical environment in which it was created.. As Raymond Williams famously asserted, "no art is free from the social order which produces it" (Williams, 1977, p. 43). In this sense, it invites readers to look beyond surface-level meanings and interrogate the socio-economic structures that influence both the creation and interpretation of texts. In doing so, Marxist criticism aligns literary interpretation with broader concerns about justice, inequality, and the potential for social transformation..

Marxist theorists also argue that all works of art function as commodities within capitalist societies, and thus can and should be analyzed in terms of their capacity to generate surplus value. According to Karl Marx, under capitalism, cultural products "appear as commodities... whose ultimate purpose is the realization of profit" (Marx, 1867, p. 165). Art, therefore, serves as a platform

for expressing symbolic forms of class conflict, revealing the contradictions embedded in social relations.

3. Similarities between Feminist and Marxist Literary theories :

Despite having different ideological backgrounds, feminist and Marxist literary theories are critical in their dedication to exposing and opposing the power structures present in literature and society. Both methods examine how texts represent, uphold, or challenge prevailing ideologies, whether they be capitalism in the case of Marxist criticism or patriarchy in the case of feminist theory.

3.1. In Critical Purpose:

The goal of both feminist and Marxist literary theories is to expose, question, and ultimately destroy oppressive and power structures as they manifest in literature and society. Both theories view literature as a social product rooted within systems of inequality rather than just as art, despite the fact that their main lenses—gender for feminism and class for Marxism—are different. ways in which literature both reflects and perpetuates social structures..

The examination of economic power and class conflict lies at the core of Marxist literary theory. Marxist critics question how literature depicts, validates, or challenges the social and economic circumstances of its epoch. In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1970, p. 64)) assert that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” This suggests that literature frequently supports the interests of those in power by normalizing the conditions of inequality.

Likewise, feminist critics study how literature supports gender-based oppression and patriarchal standards. Simone de Beauvoir famously argued, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” emphasizing the socially constructed nature of gender roles and the way literature both mirrors and molds these constructions (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 295). Thus, feminist literary theory aims to reveal the ways in which writings either support or challenge patriarchal ideology.

The question of whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in writing is central to both feminist and Marxist literary theories. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf poignantly writes, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 1929, p. 6). The statement captures the convergence of gendered constraints and economic freedom, which is a problem shared by feminists and Marxists. Marxist theory examines how working-class voices are silenced or appropriated within prevailing

ideological frameworks, whereas feminist theory challenges the systematic marginalization of women in literature.

3.2. In Deconstructing Dominant Ideologies:

The goal of dismantling prevailing ideologies, or the power structures and belief systems ingrained in literary texts that uphold the current quo, is a basic similarity between feminist and Marxist literary theories. While feminist theory focuses on the patriarchal structures that sustain gender oppression and Marxist theory emphasizes class conflict and the economic underpinnings of social inequality, both theories share the goal of exposing, criticizing, and dismantling the cultural forces that support these ideologies.

Both feminist and Marxist views undermine the appearance of "natural" roles in literature, regardless of whether they are associated with gender or class. They reveal how established social structures are frequently concealed in literature as "natural" or unavoidable. For instance, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton explains "Literature... is a social institution which reflects and refracts the ideological conflicts of its time" (Eagleton, 1976, p. 5).

Another ideological framework that both Marxist and feminist critics address is the family, which is frequently romanticized in literature. Whereas feminist thought sees the family as a source of patriarchal control, Marxist theory sees it as a microcosm of capitalist exploitation. Friedrich Engels writes "The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife" (Engels, 1884, p. 137). Engels makes a clear connection between patriarchal and capitalist exploitation and the institution of the family. By demonstrating how literature frequently romanticizes this system and so silences the oppression therein, feminist literary theory expands on this. *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a feminist critique of the ideal of the home. The protagonist's spiral into insanity serves as an example of the psychological toll that forced domesticity takes. As the narrator writes "John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition... so I will let it alone and talk about the house" (Gilman, 1892, p. 9).

3.3. In Empowering Collective and Individual Resistance:

Both theories support the ability of literature to strengthen resistance, not only in terms of abstract ideology but also as a means of confirming the agency of the oppressed, whether they be women or members of the working class. Sharing one's story is frequently viewed as radical and subversive in feminist thought. *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf makes the case for women writers to have both physical and creative space: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Woolf, 1929, p.6) This claim presents literature as a means of achieving emancipation. The creative act is

stifled in the absence of personal freedom (a feminist concern) and economic independence (a Marxist concern). If those requirements are met, literature can be a liberating tool. From a Marxist angle, Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature*, emphasizes that culture and literature are not just products of ideology but also sites of potential resistance “There are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses.” (Williams, 1977, p. 12)

This questions prevailing depictions of the working class and maintains that by humanizing, personalizing, and elevating working-class voices, literature may fend off such objectifications.

4. Differences between Feminist and Marxist literary theories :

Despite being two well-known critical approaches to text analysis, feminist and Marxist literary theories differ greatly in their underlying assumptions, objectives, and areas of emphasis. Although they both aim to reveal oppressive regimes and criticize power structures, they view literature through different ideological prisms—class and gender, respectively.

4.1. In the Foundational Concerns :

The dedication to exposing and combating oppression as it is portrayed and perpetuated in writing is at the heart of both Marxist and feminist literary ideas. Their underlying issues, however, are very different. Class conflict and the material circumstances that influence human existence are at the heart of Marxist philosophy. It sees literature as a tool that reflects or challenges the mechanics of capitalism, labor, and class hierarchy, as well as a product of economic forces. However, the focus of feminist theory's critique is on gender and patriarchy. It looks at how books portray women, define masculinity and femininity, and frequently support patriarchal viewpoints.

4.1.1. Class as the basis of analysis in Marxist theory :

The foundation of Marxist literary criticism is the conviction that literature must be interpreted in light of the social and economic contexts in which it is created and enjoyed. In the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx stated, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1977, p. 4). This fundamental concept serves as the basis for Marxist criticism's emphasis on class relations, namely the struggle between the proletariat (working class) and the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production).

By concentrating on class, literary critics can see texts as products of their respective socioeconomic settings. It assists in revealing hidden power

structures, class interests, and ideological statements that are present in stories, characters, and themes. This viewpoint is supported by Raymond Williams, who contends that literature analysis must consider its “formation, production, distribution, and reception within specific social formations” (Williams, 1977, p. 47). By supporting the current class system or promoting social change, this method encourages readers to view literature as more than just art but also as a reflection and an instrument of social structure.

The approach of historical materialism, which holds that social and cultural events must be interpreted in light of the material and economic circumstances of their era, is fundamental to Marxist interpretation. As Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*, “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 42), emphasizing the importance of material circumstances in forming ideas, even those articulated in literature. Therefore, understanding a document from a Marxist perspective entails contextualizing it within its historical and socioeconomic framework. This approach disavows strictly formalist or aesthetic methods that view texts as separate works of art. Rather, it highlights how literature is influenced by and reacts to larger social battles, particularly those pertaining to inequality, labor, and wealth.

4.1.2. Gender as the Core Concern in Feminist Theory

According to feminist theory, gender is a hierarchical structure that unequally distributes power rather than just being a binary distinction between men and women. Simone de Beauvoir famously stated that gender is a social and cultural construct rather than a biological destiny when she remarked, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1949).

The language and structure of literature are also examined by feminist theory, which looks at how literary conventions themselves might be gendered. For instance, Hélène Cixous advocates for *écriture féminine*, a distinctively feminine style of writing that challenges patriarchal systems, claiming that “writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy” (Cixous, 1981, p. 245). Traditional narrative structures are frequently perceived as reflecting patriarchal ideals, such as the linear plot centered on a dominant male hero. Women writers regularly experiment with language and structure to challenge male-centered discourse and make room for female subjectivity, according to feminist critics. Judith Butler, building on poststructuralist theory, asserts that “gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’” (Butler, 1990, p. 25), highlighting how language and discourse actively construct identity.

Intersectionality—the notion that gender cannot be understood in isolation

but must be explored with race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and other axes of identity—is becoming more and more important in contemporary feminist philosophy . Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term, explains that “intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects” ((Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

4.2. In Methodologies :

The main focus of feminist literary criticism is on how gender dynamics and patriarchal standards are reflected, upheld, or challenged in literature.

Examining how women are portrayed in literature is a very important area of methodological interest. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that 19th-century literature frequently relegates women to dichotomous roles like the "madwoman" or the "angel in the house," perpetuating patriarchal notions of feminine virtue or deviance. They write, “Women in patriarchal culture have historically been reduced to characters in someone else's story” (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 69). In order to identify the power dynamics underlying literary characterizations, their work promotes a reevaluation of such portrayals.

In order to investigate how language and story structures either support or challenge gender norms, feminist critics also use close textual analysis. *Intercourse* by Andrea Dworkin provides a contentious but significant “in literature, intercourse often becomes the vehicle of male domination and female objectification” (Dworkin, 1987, p. 125). Her interpretations push readers to consider how canonical texts normalize misogyny.

Another crucial analytical tool in feminist literary criticism is intersectionality. Bell Hooks criticizes mainstream feminist theory for ignoring the realities of working-class and women of color in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. She contends, “White women’s liberationists ... failed to understand the complexity of oppression and how it is structured by race and class as well as gender” (hooks, 1984, p. 15). By acknowledging the complex relationship between oppression and identity in literature, this intersectional method enhances feminist analysis.

Marxist literary criticism, on the other hand, examines literature via the prism of ideological frameworks, economic systems, and class conflict. Historical materialism, which holds that all cultural and ideological phenomena, including literature, are shaped by material and economic circumstances, is a fundamental methodological tenet.

Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, introduces the idea that literature operates as a "socially symbolic act," encoding ideological tensions and class struggles, often unconsciously. He writes, “Always historicize!”

(Jameson, 1981, p. 9) calling for literary analysis to recover the underlying socio-political forces embedded in narratives.

Marxist critics also investigate ideology in literature, analyzing how texts may reinforce or challenge dominant class ideologies. Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature*, discusses the concept of hegemony, asserting that “hegemony is not only the articulate upper level of ‘ideology,’ it is also the lived system of meanings and values” (Williams, 1977, p. 110). Literature, then, can be either a tool for maintaining this cultural dominance or a medium for resistance.

Additionally, examining the socioeconomic backgrounds of writers and the material circumstances surrounding the creation of literary works is a common component of Marxist critique. This biographical and production-focused viewpoint takes into account how an author's thematic concerns and ideological stance are influenced by their historical background and socioeconomic position.

As a result, feminist and Marxist literary theories provide different but related approaches to literary analysis. Using concepts like gynocritics and intersectionality, feminist criticism focuses on gender relations, representation, and the reclaiming of women's voices. Marxist criticism, in contrast, places a strong emphasis on ideological critique, historical materialism, and class conflict. When combined, these theories offer strong instruments for understanding literature as a mirror of and a challenge to social systems.

4.3. In Literary Canon and Representation

Feminist critics challenge the traditional literary canon, arguing that it has historically prioritized male authors and male-centered narratives. As Elaine Showalter asserts, “the literary canon has been shaped by male editors, critics, and professors, who have assumed that great literature can only be written by men” (Showalter, 1979, p. 32). The incorporation of women's writing and other narrative forms that convey female experience, emotions, and subjectivity, as well as a reevaluation of literary value, are thus promoted by feminist literary theory. In agreement, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that “literary history has been written by men and for men” and that women's voices have long been “muted or misrepresented” within canonical traditions (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, pp. 45–46)

Marxist theory examines class bias, questioning whose interests literature serves and which class perspectives are being highlighted or suppressed, whereas feminist theory challenges gender bias. This is further highlighted by Raymond Williams, who states that “the selective tradition is always the function of a particular class interest, and works to legitimize certain forms of

experience while excluding others” (Williams, 1977, p. 115). Both feminist and Marxist critics thus share a commitment to demystifying the canon by uncovering the power relations embedded in literary production and reception.

Conclusion :

Both feminist and Marxist literary theories aim to examine how oppressive institutions, such as capitalism or patriarchy, are reflected in and reinforced by literature. Although their main issues are different—class for Marxism and gender for feminism—their dedication to highlighting systemic injustices makes for insightful overlaps and complimentary perspectives. Readers are urged to acknowledge the sociopolitical factors that influence stories, characters, and interpretations by examining literature through these critical lenses. In the end, the interaction of feminist and Marxist perspectives enhances literary criticism by providing more complex, nuanced interpretations that take into consideration both the economic and gendered aspects of power.

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