

University of Oum Bouaghi

Lecturer: Miss Haddad.M

Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages

Department of English Language

Module: Theory of Literature

Lecture n°03: Structuralism

## **Structuralism**

### **Selected Readings:**

**Barthes, Roland. "*The Structuralist Analysis of Narratives*"**

----- (1970).S/Z. Trans. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, Inc. Malden, New York:  
**Blackwell Publishers, 2002.**

**Jameson ,Frederic. *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism  
and Russian Formalism* (1972)**

**Culler ,Jonathan(1981). *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction.*  
London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group,2005**

-----***On Deconstruction Theory and Criticism after Structuralism.* Ithaca, New York:  
Cornell University Press, 1985.**

----- (1976)***Ferdinand de Saussure.*Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (1986)**

-----***Structuralist Poetics* (1975)**

**Jakobson, Roman "*Literature and Linguistics*"**

**Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "*The Structural Study of Myth*"**

## **Introduction:**

In Prague, in the late 1920's, Structuralism rose on the ashes of Formalism and continued the work of earlier Formalists. It is another theory which analyses the form of the literary text but through a new analytical method that not only did it distress literary criticism but also changed up the way of considering society, history, culture, philosophy, sciences, anthropology...etc. One cannot find one precise definition or application of structuralism.

Structuralism, as the term suggests, is concerned with structures and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work.

To understand structuralism as a social, cultural, scientific or literary theory one must assimilate linguistic structuralism.

So this course will be outlined as the following:

### **1- Linguistic Structuralism**

### 2-Anthropological Structuralism

### 3-Semiology

### 4-Literary Structuralism

### 5- The French School of Structuralism

### **1-The Linguistic background:**

Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of linguistic Structuralism, observed that words stand in arbitrary relation to the things they name. We understand each other only because we agree about the meaning of sound combinations. Moreover, we understand something insofar as we

perceive that it is different from something else (Car is not cat because we distinguish the r from t). The crucial insight here is that meaning is located where difference is perceived.

Saussure further observed that speakers of a language can generate an infinite number of different utterances (paroles) but that all of these utterances obey the rules of the language system (langue). Here, De Saussure gave much importance to langue because it is the system that explains and provides parole with rules. Behind the infinity of possible statements there is a more limited system of enabling rules. Saussure distinguished between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. A word in a sentence acquires meaning from its position in the sentence, syntagmatically, in relation to what it precedes and follows; and from other words that might have stood in its place, paradigmatically, in relation to the array of words (synonyms, antonyms, alternative utterances) that the speaker could have chosen but did not choose. Saussure, also, developed an approach to the synchronic study of language (how language works at a particular moment in time) that radically departed from the historical linguistics, which de Saussure called diachronic linguistics (Atkins,62). He opted for an ahistorical, and far more abstract approach. According to De Saussure, the question concerning the way particular languages changed over particular periods were subordinate to a more fundamental question: how does language work? Saussure focused on the question of how language actually works in order to formulate general insights that would be valid for all languages.

This approach led Saussure to the idea that language is a system of signs. Second, those signs are arbitrary and have not taken their specific form because of what they mean, but to be different from other signs (Bertens,43,44)

### Summary of De Saussure's Structuralism:

1- The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign

2-The language is a system of differences ( the meaning is located where difference is perceived) (Car is not Cat)

3- Parole/Langue De Saussure gave much importance to langue because it is the system that explains and provides parole with rules.

4- Syntagmatic/Paradigmatic

5- Diachronic/Synchronic. He opted for an ahistorical approach.

How does language work?

De Saussure focused on the question of how language actually works in order to formulate general insights that would be valid for all languages

The language is a sign system which is governed by difference. It inspired other fields to develop their Structuralist methods and anthropology is one of them.

**N.B:** The principle of linguistic Structuralism can be projected on other field of studies:  
Literature can work according to general rules (remember Propp's taxonomy)

### **2-Anthropological Structuralism:**

Claude Lévi-Strauss was the first anthropologist to see the potential of Saussure's analysis of language as a way of approaching the most diverse cultural phenomena. In the early decades of the twentieth century, anthropology was still largely descriptive and functionalist: it sought to record the myths, taboos, rituals, customs, manners, in short; everything that was recordable of the non-Western cultures, and to establish their function. Lévi-Strauss broke with that tradition in two major ways: the first way is indebted to Vladimir Propp's study of Russian fairytales. Transposing Propp's idea to the field of myths, Lévi-Strauss tried to show how the most diverse myths, recorded in cultures, that seemingly have no connection with each other, can be seen as variations upon one and the same system of ideas.

Lévi- Strauss could see the possibilities of Saussure's notion that meaning is ultimately the product of difference for the study of discrete cultural phenomena. Eating customs, taboos, hunting rites, the preparation of food, the rules of underlying so-called kinship relations- in short, everything that has a cultural origin, and is not biologically determined, counts as a sign. The discrete bits of culture that we can distinguish are not meaningful in themselves, but draw their meaning from the sign system in which they function and, in particular, from their difference from other signs. As Lévi-Strauss put it with regard to masks: 'A mask does not exist in isolation; it supposes other real or potential masks always by its side, masks that might have been chosen in its stead and substituted for it' (Lévi-Strauss, 144). What a given element signifies within a culture depends on the system, and not on intrinsic meaning. Just like the relationship between the linguistic sign and its real world referent, the relationship between a specific cultural phenomenon and what it expresses—its meaning—is arbitrary in the sense that it is determined by convention.

Lévi-Strauss's anthropological structuralism is interested in the question of how our ancestors started to make sense of the world they found themselves in. A very basic mental process consists in the creation of opposites: some things are edible, others are not, some creatures are dangerous, and others are not. Consequently, Lévi-Strauss's basic assumption is that our primitive ancestors deployed this simple model, or structure, to get a grip of the world that slowly began to appear to them something separate and alien. For Lévi-Strauss, the structure of primitive thinking is **binary**. Having acquired the rudiments of language, our ancestors must have started to categorize their world in very basic terms that always involved a presence and an absence- light/darkness, man-made/natural, below/above, noise/silence, clothes/naked, sacred/profane and so on (Bertens, 48,49).

The most important finding of Structuralist anthropology: (This will help you later with Post-structuralism and Deconstruction)

*Binary oppositions: our ancestors must have started to categorize their world in a very basic terms that always involved a presence and an absence: Light/darkness, man-made/ natural, below/above, noise/silence, clothes/naked, sacred/profane etc*

Students may raise this question: How can one apply linguistic and anthropological structuralisms on literature? In other words, what is the relationship between literary theory and Structuralism?

Before tackling this point, we have to talk about semiology(semiotics) so that we can understand more structuralism.

### **3-Semiotics/Semiology:**

Because things are not necessarily what they seem, we are always decoding our world. We interpret gestures, we translate simple remarks. Because people obey certain rules (of grammar, of etiquette, of artistry, or more deeply of the sub-conscious) in producing texts (whether verbal, visual or other), we are always encoding our world. Some of these operations are so basic to the lived experience of people who share a culture that the rules seem self evident and, therefore, natural. The structuralist or semiotician takes a few steps back to scrutinize that which seem self-evident (Atkins, 60).

Semiotics also asks the question how language conveys meaning. Structuralism and semiotics recognize that communities that share a textual history reach a consensus about meaning because they share codes and conventions of expression. That consensus is limited to the

extent that individual experiences of codes vary. Thus, although you and I share a basic notion of what the word friend means, a different idea, image, person undoubtedly comes to each of us when we think of the word. Moreover, the world has not always been encoded in the same way by all people in all places at all times (Atkins 61).

In 1957, the French literary critic Roland Barthes (1915-80)- who would later claim that culture is 'a language'- published *Mythologies*, influenced by Lévi-Strauss, in which he applies a structuralist analysis to the differences between boxing and wrestling and between soap-powders and detergents, to the drinking of milk versus the drinking of wine. His boxers and wrestlers do not make personal statements with the motions they go through but these motions are signs that take their meaning from the underlying structure of their activities. The central insights of this cultural structuralism-called semiology (a term coined by Saussure) or semiotics- have been enormously productive and still play a prominent role in the way we think about how cultures work. The semiological or semiotic approach in which the most diverse things (including many of our actions) are seen as signs that have no meaning in themselves but that take their meaning from their function within a given structure- from their relation with other signs- is still of great importance. (Bertens, 52,53)

#### **4-Literary Criticism:**

In his book *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton provides readers with an explicit explanation of Structuralism as a theory of literature. He claims that Structuralism is concerned with structures, and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work. Structuralism contains a distinctive doctrine: the belief that the individual units of any system have meaning only by virtue of their relations to one another. For example, we can consider a poem a structure. Perhaps the poem contains one image about the sun and another about the moon and you are interested in how these two images fit together to form a structure. You

become a card-carrying structuralist only when you claim that the meaning of each image is wholly a matter of its relation to the other. The images do not have a 'substantial' meaning, only a relational one. You do not need to go outside the poem, to what you know of suns and moons, to explain them, they explain and define each other. So, structuralists are not interested in the world outside the text, they consider the text a self regulating structure as Northrop Frye insists that literature is 'an autonomous verbal structure' quite cut off from "any reference beyond itself, a sealed and inward-looking realm which contain[s] life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (qtd. in Eagleton, 80).

Also, unlike Formalists- who treated words in an isolated way-, Structuralists analyse words on the basis of their relationship with other words within the same text (structure).

Structuralism as a literary theory is so vast and follows, in its analysis, many methods and differs from one critic to another. For instance, Structuralism applied by Roland Barthes is different from that of Tzvetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince, Michel Foucault or Julia Kristeva. Because each one of them focuses on the analysis of one of the different elements of fiction (plot, point of view, characters,...).

To explain the structural analysis, Eagleton illustrates with a simple example.

Suppose we are analyzing a story in which a boy leaves home after quarrelling with his father, sets out on a walk through the forest in the heat of the day and falls down a deep pit. The father comes out in search of his son, peers down the pit, but is unable to see him because of the darkness. At that moment the sun has risen to a point directly overhead, illuminates the pit's depths with its rays and allows the father to rescue his child. After a joyous reconciliation, they return home together.

This may not be a particularly gripping narrative, but it has the advantage of simplicity.

What a structuralist critic would do would be to schematize the story in diagrammatic form.

**The first unit of signification**, 'boy quarrels with father', might be rewritten as 'low rebels against high'. The boy's walk through the forest is a movement along a horizontal axis, in contrast to the vertical axis 'low/high', and could be indexed as 'middle'. The fall into the pit, a place below ground, signifies 'low' again, and the zenith of the sun 'high'. By shining into the pit, the sun has in a sense stooped 'low', thus inverting the narrative's first signifying unit, where 'low' struck against 'high'. The reconciliation between father and son restores an equilibrium between 'low' and 'high', and the walk back home together, signifying 'middle', marks this achievement of a suitably intermediate state.

What is notable about this kind of analysis is that, like Formalism, it brackets off the actual *content* of the story and concentrates entirely on the form. You could replace father and son, pit and sun, with entirely different elements mother and daughter, bird and mole - and still have the *same* story. As long as the structure of *relations* between the units is preserved, it does not matter which items you select.

The relations between the various items of the story may be ones of parallelism, opposition, inversion, equivalence and so on; and as long as this structure of internal relations remains intact, the individual units are replaceable.

Three other points may be noted about the method. First, it does not matter to structuralism that this story is hardly an example of great literature. The method is quite indifferent to the cultural value of its object. The method is analytical, not evaluative. Second, structuralism is a calculated affront to common sense. It refuses the 'obvious' meaning of the story and seeks instead to isolate certain 'deep' structures within it, which are not apparent on the surface. It does not take the text at face value, but 'displaces' it into a quite different kind of object. (Eagleton, 83)

Generally, for the Structuralists, the literary text is a construct whose mechanisms could be classified and analyzed like the objects of any other science.

#### 5- The French School of Structuralism:

Roland Barthes along with Michel Foucault and Tzvetan Todorov showed an interest in relatively sophisticated narrative- the fiction of Proust, Racine, Balzac- and some popular modes like mystery novels and humour. Yet, they accept the Saussurean linguistic model, and thus, an essentially syntagmatic approach to texts. They have viewed narrative as a kind of analogy to the sentence: the text, like the entire sentence expresses the writer's mind and is a whole composed of distinguishable parts. As if Structuralism aim is to discover the structure of the human psyche, that is, the minimal basic structures that we transform to generate unique expressions.

Instead of the Russian Formalists' distinction between story and plot, the French Structuralists use the terms **histoire** (essentially the sequence of events from their beginning to the end) and **discours** (the narrative rearranged and reconstructed for its own purposes and aesthetic effects).

For the Structuralists, the text is a message which can be understood only by reference to the code. As in our daily life we communicate with each other using a language governed by a code (langue), in literature Structuralists tried to classify literary codes that will help up in reading texts. In his seminal Structuralist analysis **S/Z** of Balzac's **Sarrasine**, Roland Barthes creates five literary codes. **The Proairectic code** (code of actions) asks the reader to find meaning in the sequence of events. **The Hermeneutic code** ( code of Puzzles) raises the questions to be answered. **The Cultural Code** refers to all systems of knowledge and values invoked by a text. **The Connotative code** expresses themes developed around the characters.

**The Symbolic Code** refers to the themes as we have generally considered it- the meaning of the work. We need not identify all five codes; we may choose to blend two or more in an analysis.

Finally, this is not all about Literary Structuralism, because we have a lot of key figures in this theory. Overall, this is just an introduction or a general overview of this theory.

**References:**

Atkins, G. Douglas, Laura Morrow eds. *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Massachusetts: Massachusetts University Press, 1989.

Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008

Eagleton, Terry(1983). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1996

Fry, Paul H. *Theory of Literature*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012.

University of Oum-ElBouaghi

Department of English Language

Module: Theory of literature

Third year students

Lecture 04

### **Feminist literary Criticism**

In the Western history, women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and obedience, as well as a male literary establishment that poured scorn on their literary endeavours. It was only with women's struggles in the twentieth century that feminist criticism arose in systematic way. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> C feminist criticism has grown to encompass a vast series of concerns: a rewriting of literary tradition; theories of sexuality and sexual difference, drawing on psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the social sciences; the representation of women in male literature; the role of gender in both literary creation and literary criticism ( as studied in so-called "gynocriticism"); the connection between gender and various aspects of literary form; above all, feminist critics have displayed a persistent concern with both experience and language: is there a specifically female experience that has been communicated by women writers? And how do women confront the task of being historically coerced into using a language dominated by male concepts and values? Some feminists have urged the need for a female language, while others have advocated appropriating and modifying the inherited language of the male oppressor.

Indeed, one of the invaluable accomplishments of feminism has been utterly to reject the notions of objectivity and neutrality; feminists have pioneered a new honesty in acknowledging that they write from subjective positions informed by specific circumstances.

It is clear, also, that feminism has potential areas of overlap with certain theories such as deconstruction and Marxism. However, it should be said that feminism is not comprised of any one movement or set of values; it has been broadly international in scope and its disposition is dictated by many local as well as general factors. For example, writers from Arab traditions such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed have attempted to articulate a feminist vision distinctly marked by their specific cultural concerns; the same is true of

African-American feminists such as Alice Walker. What follows is a brief account of feminism in French, American, and British traditions.

### **The Development of Feminist Literary Criticism:**

#### **1- First-wave feminist criticism: Virginia Woolf (Check also the lecture)**

The Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage movements were the crucial determinants in shaping this phase, with their emphasis on social, political and economic. Feminist criticism of the earlier period is more a reflex of 'first-wave' preoccupations than a fully-fledged theoretical discourse of its own.

Virginia Woolf's fame conventionally rests on her own creative writing as a woman. Feminist critics have analyzed her novels extensively from very different perspectives. She produced a key text which is a major contribution to feminist theory, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Like other 'first-wave' feminists, Woolf is principally concerned with women's material disadvantages compared to men. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was a landmark work in which representations of women by male authors are roundly criticized and a new model for female identity and agency is proffered. Woolf also insisted that women be allowed the economic and social freedom to follow their aspirations and to forgo the traditional role of serving as an enlarging mirror for male identity.

Woolf's general contribution to feminism, then, is her recognition that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed, but apropos of feminist criticism she also continually examined the problems facing women writers. She believed that women had always faced social and economic obstacles to their literary ambitions, and was herself conscious of the restricted education she had received (she was taught no Greek, for example, unlike her brothers)

One of Woolf's most interesting essays about women writers is 'Professions for Women', in which she regards her own career as hindered in two ways. First, she was imprisoned and constrained by the dominant ideologies of womanhood. Second, the taboo about expressing female passion prevented her from telling the truth about her own experiences as a body.

#### **2- 'Second Wave Criticism'**

##### **French Feminism**

The impetus for much modern French feminism was drawn from the revolutionary atmosphere of May 1968 which saw massive unrest on the part of students and workers.

In that atmosphere, an integral component of political revolution was seen as the transformation of signifying practices and conceptions of subjectivity, based on a radical understanding of the power of language. Drawing heavily on the ideas of Jacques Lacan and feminists such as Annie Leclerc, Marguerite Duras, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous variously participated in advancing a notion of *l'écriture féminine*, a feminine writing that would issue from the unconscious, the body, from a radically reconceived subjectivity, in an endeavor to circumvent what they held to be phallogocentric discourse.

For Kristeva, such language came from a pre-Oedipal state, from the realm of the “semiotic,” prior to the process of cultural gender formation. She was aware, however, that reliance solely on this “maternal” language would entail the risk of political marginalization. Indeed, Luce Irigaray advocates undermining patriarchal discourse from within, a strategy she pursues in her readings of several discourses from Plato through Freud and Marx to Lacan. She does, however, indicate that a feminine language would be more diffuse, like her sexuality, and less rigidly categorizing than male discourse.

Hélène Cixous also sees a “solidarity” between logocentrism and phallogocentrism (where the phallus is a signifier, a metaphor of male power and dominance), an alliance that must be questioned and undermined. Women, she urged, must write their bodies, to unfold the resources of the unconscious. All of these writers reevaluate the significance of the maternal, viewing this as empowering rather than as oppressed. Other feminists, however, such as Christine Fauré, Catherine Clément, and Monique Wittig, have challenged this emphasis on the body as biologically reductive, fetishistic, and politically impotent. Monique Wittig wishes to do away with the linguistic categories of sex and gender.

### **American Feminism**

Feminist criticism in America received a major stimulus from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and has differed somewhat in its concerns from its counterparts in France and Britain, notwithstanding the undoubted impact of earlier figures such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. A seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), was authored by Betty Friedan, who subsequently founded the National Organization of Women in 1966. This widely received book expressed the fundamental grievance of middle-class American women, their entrapment within private, domestic life, and their inability to pursue public careers. A number of other important feminist texts were produced around this time: Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), which used

gender rather than class as the prime category of historical analysis. Millett's influential book concerned female sexuality and the representation of women in literature. It argued that patriarchy was a political institution which relied on subordinated roles for women. It also distinguished between the concept of "sex," which was rooted in biology, and that of "gender," which was culturally acquired. Other critics in this tradition of examining masculine portrayals of women included Carolyn Heilbrun and Judith Fetterly.

A number of feminist texts have attempted to identify alternative and neglected traditions of female writing. These have included Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). The most influential work of this kind was Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), which traced three phases of women's writing, a "feminine" phase (1840–1880) where women writers imitated male models, a "feminist" phase (1880–1920) during which women challenged those models and their values, and a "female" phase (from 1920) which saw women advocating their own perspectives. Recent debates within American feminism, conducted by figures such as Showalter, Lillian Robinson, Annette Kolodny, and Jane Marcus, have concerned the relationship of female writers to male theories, the need for feminist theory and a female language, the relation of feminism to poststructuralist perspectives, as well as continuing problems of political and educational activism.

Also hotly debated has been the possible connection of feminism and Marxism. Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (1980) attempts to reconcile Marxist and feminist principles in analyzing the representation of gender. Other works in this vein include Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt's *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (1985), which also argues for feminist analysis that takes account of social and economic contexts. A notable recent development has been the attempt to think through feminism from black and minority perspectives, as in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and Barbara Smith's *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (1977). Finally, significant contributions by lesbian critics include Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980). Judith Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* (1990) was a powerful critique of heterosexual assumptions in feminist theory of the dualism of masculinity and femininity, in the contexts of Western metaphysics, psychoanalysis, and power structures.

## **British Feminism**

Twentieth-century British feminist criticism might be said to begin with Virginia Woolf. Much British feminist criticism has had apolitical orientation, insisting on situating both feminist concerns and literary texts within a material and ideological context. In her landmark work “Women: The Longest Revolution,” later expanded and produced as *Women’s Estate* (1971), Juliet Mitchell examined patriarchy in terms of Marxist categories of production and private property as well as psychoanalytic theories of gender. Her later works such as *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) continue to refine her attempt to integrate the insights of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Another seminal text was Michèle Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today* (1980), which attempted to formulate a materialist aesthetics and insisted on integrating Marxist class analysis with feminism in analyzing and influencing gender representation. Also critical of the tendency of American feminists to combat male stereotypes and to recover female traditions are Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt. Finally, a number of critics such as Cora Kaplan, Mary Jacobus, and Penny Boumelha have comprised the UK Marxist-Feminist Collective, formed in 1976.

## **Elaine Showalter (b. 1941)**

An influential American feminist critic has been Elaine Showalter, who developed “gynocriticism,” a criticism concerned with the specificity of women’s experience and women’s writing. Showalter’s most influential book has been *A Literature of their Own* (1977), whose title reflects Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Indeed, Showalter here takes up the issue initially posed by Woolf, that of a female literary tradition. Her book’s title, however, derives not from Woolf but from the philosopher John Stuart Mill, one of the few males to have championed the rights of women. In his polemical text *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill had observed how difficult it would be for women to free themselves from the constraints and influences of the male literary tradition; had they been able to live apart from men, they “would have a literature of their own.”

Ironically, then, Showalter’s book sets out to contradict Mill’s well-intended statement, to show that, if we re-read literary history carefully, we can in fact discern a female literary heritage.

The most fundamental undertaking and achievement of Showalter’s book is her formulation of the female literary tradition as an evolution through three phases. She observes that literary subcultures (such as black, Jewish, Anglo-Indian) tend to pass through three stages. First,

there is a phase of *imitation* of the modes of the dominant tradition; the artistic standards of that tradition, as well as the social roles it implies, are internalized. The second is a stage of *protest* against these standards and values, and a call for autonomy. The final stage is one of *self-discovery*, a “turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (*LTO*, 13). Viewing the women’s literary tradition in terms of these phases, Showalter suggests that the first phase might be called the *feminine* phase, spanning the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880. The *feminist* period extends from 1880 until the year 1920 when women won the vote. And the third, or *female*, phase runs from 1920 until around 1960, at which point women’s writing enters “a new stage of self-awareness” (*LTO*, 13).

### **3-Third-wave feminist criticism:**

These feminists who gained popularity in the 1980's and 1990's, constituted a third wave of feminist critics that shifted their concerns to ignored women of color and 'third world woman'. We can refer to this wave by the term 'Minority feminist criticism'. This term encompasses different minorities: Black, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, Jewish, Third World and other groups of women. They reject classic literary tradition as oppressive. Not only do they find most other critics racists and misogynists, but they accuse other feminist critics of developing their ideas only in reference to white, upper-middle-class women who oftentimes practice feminism only in order to become part of the patriarchal power structure they criticize for excluding them.

Their rejection of western feminism is clearly revealed in the attempt of some minority women critics and writers like Alice Walker to refuse the term feminism. Speaking as a woman of colour, Walker writes in her collection of criticism, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that she has replaced feminist with womanist.

### **Some helpful questions to guide the feminist analysis:**

The literary critic Lois Tyson proposed some questions that help guide the analysis of a literary work from a feminist perspective:

- How is the relationship between men and women?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity?

- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy.
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?
- What role the work plays in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition?

Feminism has transformed the academic study of literature. It has caused a major reorientation of values in literary studies and elsewhere in Western culture and it will continue to challenge long-held beliefs and practices. But it has obviously not been popular in all quarters. It has been powerfully attacked by those who are suspicious of its social values and who fear its politicizing of artistic value. Aside from male rejection of feminism, there are some major problems that will continue to raise important questions about feminist theory and practice. One of the persistent problems for feminism is the question of what to do with male feminist critics. Many feminists believe that no man can possibly read or write or teach as a feminist.

This lecture is adapted from:

M.A.R. Habib. *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory From Plato to the Present*.  
Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005