

November 2021

E-ISSN - 2348-7143

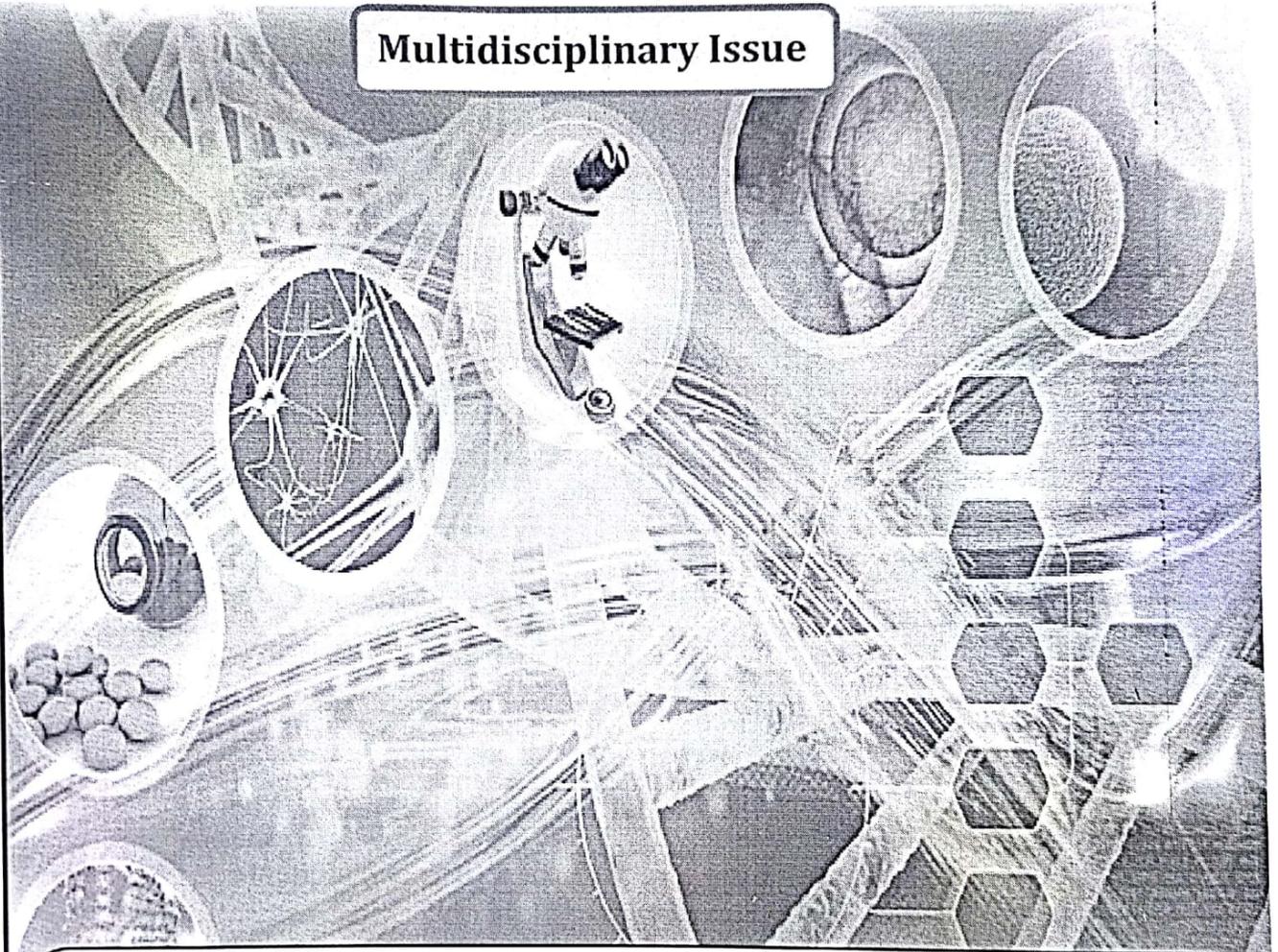
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International E-Research Journal

Peer Reviewed, Referred & Indexed Journal

Issue 279 (B)

Multidisciplinary Issue



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Feminist Stylistics : Nature, Scope and Limitations

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Abstract :

The term 'feminist stylistics' apparently seems to be made up of two terms: 'feminism' and 'stylistics'. However, the nature of feminist stylistics is inclusive one. It is interlinked with various branches of knowledge such as feminism, linguistics, stylistics, and critical literary theories. Feminist stylistics is a form of politically motivated stylistics whose aim is to develop an awareness of the way gender is handled in text. Generally, feminism itself is a rainbow term that covers social and political movements as well as ideologies planned to define and create the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. Linguistics deals with the scientific study of language. The study of linguistics is basically the study of human languages. It includes an analysis of form, meaning and context of language. It also studies the social, cultural, historical, and political factors that influence language. Stylistics, on the other hand, is the study of the ways in which meaning is shaped through language used in literary and non-literary texts. Stylistics uses linguistic models, theories, and frameworks as analytical tools. The present paper aims at dealing with the complex and mutually dependent relationship of the feminism, linguistics and stylistics along with the scope and limitations of the Feminist stylistics as a sub-branch of stylistics.

Key Words: Feminism, Linguistics, Stylistics, Feminist stylistics.

Introduction:

Feminist stylistics has been one of the perspectives extensively in use for the analysis of literary and non-literary texts. The roots of Feminist stylistics go back to the theories and practices of feminist criticism which initiated in the United States and France. Feminist criticism itself develops its theoretical basis from the larger feminist movement which advocates the social, political and economic equality between the sexes. But the multilateral and multidimensional nature of feminism has resulted into the term "feminisms" rather than "feminism". Stylistics is a branch of linguistics which deals with the study of the distinctive styles found in particular literary genres and in the works of individual writers. Peter Barry expresses his opinion on stylistics as:

"Stylistics is a modern version of the ancient discipline known as 'rhetoric', which taught its students how to structure an argument, how to make effective use of figures of speech, and generally how to pattern and vary a speech or a piece of writing so as to produce maximum impact" (2013:198).

Stylistics, therefore, was discussed largely under the head of oratory. The proper vocabulary, type of syntax and figures of speech, particularly tropes and other devices, were prescribed for the purposes in hand. With its base in linguistics, stylistics is characterized by a systematic, informed, and contextual analysis, which is precise, reliable and verifiable. Linguistics, as a branch of knowledge, studies language scientifically, and so the stylistic approach to text analysis may seem more objective than other branches of literary criticism.

Feminist Stylistics, which is a combination of both feminism and stylistics, is considered as a sub-discipline in the field of applied linguistics which demonstrates how language,





ideologies and dominance are interconnected in literary works. It also provides possibilities for discovering and showing the realities of social injustice against women in patriarchal societies and in the works of art. Feminist stylistic approach can be applied to any literary as well as non-literary text. The nature of this approach is thus, a complex and interdependent. As compared to the other text-oriented approaches, feminist stylistic approach is an adaptable and rather fluid in its nature.

Inclusive nature of feminist stylistics:

The label 'feminist stylistics' should be suitably credited to Mills (1995). Although she was not the first stylistician to implement a feminist stylistics perspective, she was the one who coined the term and described more fully the practices of this sub-branch. However, Mills had earlier used the term 'Marxist feminist stylistics' in 1992 which was a slightly different version. Mills defines feminist stylistics as a particular 'form of analysis':

Both the 'feminist' and the 'stylistics' parts of this phrase are complex and may have different meanings for readers. Nevertheless, the phrase itself is one which best sums up my concern first and foremost with an analysis which identifies itself as feminist and which uses linguistic or language analysis to examine texts [...]. Thus, feminist stylistic analysis is concerned not only to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyse the way that point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender, to discover whether women's writing practices can be described, and so on. (Mills 1995:1)

Despite the diversity of meanings connected with stylistics and feminism, Mills (1995) promotes that a mutual combination of the two in terms of their policies and principles can bring particularly fruitful results. Mills argues that these positive results can come about when a description of gender's linguistic encoding is carried out by using some of the devices discussed in stylistics, such as 'point of view, agency, metaphor or transitivity'.

Successive reformulations by Mills in relation to the role that readers play in the creation of gendered meanings draw attention to the fact that the readership does not necessarily always remain completely ignorant to some of those gendered significations. Readers are capable of identifying those meanings that stand out as being 'oppressive and pernicious' and they may, consequently, resist or react to them. The aim of feminist stylistics, then, is twofold. On the one hand, analysts examine the way text producers use linguistic features which purposely project male or female values; but also, stylisticians consider the way readers or indeed advertising, cinema or radio audiences and many other types of discourse participants, for that matter, in a careful and deliberate manner or unintentionally identify specific gendered meanings in texts. In order to understand the twofold aim which characterizes feminist stylistic approaches, it is helpful to first pay attention to the way general theoretical approaches to language and gender studies on the one hand, and linguistic feminism, on the other, have evolved and have come to influence feminist stylistic work. The interrelationship among the feminism, feminist theory and feminist criticism becomes the crux of the theoretical base that would be applied to any work of art from feminist stylistic perspective.

Critical linguistics as a precursor of feminist stylistics:

Feminist stylistics relates the language of texts to extra-textual political processes. It has a precursor in critical linguistics. Critical linguistics is the study of texts from political perspective.

Hodge and Kress in their book *Social Semiotics* (1988) define critical linguistics as a theory of language which aims to provide an informative account of verbal language as a social phenomenon, especially for the use of critical theorists who want to explore social and political forces and processes as they act through and on texts and forms of discourse. Roger Fowler states in this regard:

“Critical linguistics simply means an enquiry into the relations between signs, meanings and the social and historical conditions which govern the semiotic structure of discourse using a particular kind of linguistic analysis.”
(Fowler 1991: 5)

Critical linguists such as Hodge and Kress (1988:vii) have explained that meaning does not simply lie in a text but depends on the process of relations between the social systems. For all these linguists language is not an apparent carrier of meanings, but a medium which has its own limitations on the meaning which is construct. Language is considered as a social phenomenon.

For Hodge and Kress it is not enough simply to analyse language. They state that meaning of text resides in other systems of meaning other than verbal language. Visual, aural, behavioural and other codes are also equally important for the fuller understanding and complete meaning of the text. However, these codes have to be studied in context as they do not have any fix, ideal, and the only one meaning in isolation. Thus, these codes provide text its context and entirety.

Sara Mills opines that focusing on content analysis alone is the greatest shortcoming as claims of such analyses are based on unsound theoretical positions. Such approach contains much subjectivity of traditional literary analysis and it has all the theoretical lacunas of that type of criticism. Furthermore, this approach narrows down the theorist to evaluating the text either as a 'good representation' or 'sexist' representation of women (Mills 1995: 11). For such reasons, Mills focuses on the content analysis along with analysis of the language of a text in the context of its production and reception process through more inclusive approach called feminist stylistic approach.

Scope of feminist stylistics:

Feminist Stylistics includes the branches of knowledge such as feminism, feminist theories, feminist criticism, linguistics, stylistics and literary theories etc. Feminist stylistic approach can be applied to any texts and brought it within the scope of the critical stylistic analysis. Rocio Montoro in the book *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics* defines feminist stylistics as:

“...the sub-branch of stylistics which aims to account for the way in which gender concerns are linguistically encoded in texts, and which attempts to do so by employing some of the frameworks and models pertaining in the stylistics tool-kit” (2014: 346).

As feminist stylistics assumes the theories from feminism, it would be in the right frame of the things to deal with the interrelationship among the feminism, feminist theory and feminist criticism. The variety of arguments and diversity within feminism, make it difficult to give it a precise definition. There is a variety of minor aspects within the term feminism and so it can be better used in its plurality as 'feminisms'. 'Feminism' as a concept is based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination. The concept of woman is at the centre in the formation of feminist theory. Themes explored in feminism and feminist theory include gender,



patriarchy, sexual objectification, women as an 'other', oppression through power, hegemony, and ideology. However, Feminist criticism deals with the actual power relations between men and women and how women are represented in literary forms. It also evaluates the texts and its potential to naturalize the oppression of women.

The extensive work in linguistics, sociolinguistics and literary theory has opposed the ways in which language was being studied. They exposed language to be unstable, changing, and dynamic entity. They also explode the myth of a homogeneous speech community. This paved a path to a broader perspective of combining both linguistic as well as literary elements within the same analysis. Feminist stylistic approach provides a collection of questions with which readers can examine a text and form their own reading process, and thus, become aware of how text comes to have multiple meanings rather than the meaning (Mills 1995: 6-7). Thus, feminist stylistic point of view includes textuality informed by both linguistics and literary theory.

Language and Gender Studies:

While studies on the edge of language and gender usually bring to light differences of language use as employed by men and women. Feminist linguistics identifies a political and ideological component which might not be the main focus for the studies on language. Feminist stylistics, therefore, originally sat comfortably in the feminist linguistics camp although recent developments have suggested that the actual boundaries between those two approaches should be best understood as fluid and malleable, just like the notion of gender.

Feminist stylistics is stimulated by feminist theory but tries to explore the workings of gender through linguistic analyses of texts. Feminist stylistics also relates the language of texts to the extra-textual political processes. Feminist stylistics contributes to New Historicism a view of discourse as something which conveys social and institutionally incorporated prejudices and ideologies, particularly the respective roles and the mental and behavioural characteristics of men and women. Feminist literary theorists have made many attempts to consider the language of texts in some detail. Sara Mills (1995:16) observes, 'Close language analysis, such as the feminist critical analysis, emphasizes the importance of studying language and 'commonsense' views of it, and of taking gender issues into account when constructing theories of what language is and how it works'.

Feminist stylistics is concerned with the general focus drawn by Leech and Short (2007: 13), that is, why authors have chosen certain ways to express themselves rather than others, and how certain effects are achieved through language. Feminist stylistics adopts an advanced approach which combines linguistic and literary as well as textual and contextual analysis of the text under question. The scope of this approach is thus, not limited to task-based, question oriented text analysis but takes into consideration the text analysis with a wider concern with the way readers form interpretation related to their gender, depending on the reader's gender-identity.

Limitations:

In spite of its critical, textual and contextual nature and inclusive scope feminist stylistics is not free from some limitations. The interrelationship among feminism, linguistics, stylistics and feminist stylistics is a multifaceted and based on mutual coordination. Foundation of feminist stylistics is linguistics; but if stylistician's linguistic knowledge is faulty then the ultimate analysis is going to be wrong and suspicious. Moreover, if the linguistic system is



treated as stable, undisputed, natural as if it is a homogeneous entity all using it in the same way, the interpretations and evaluations would result as misleading. The focus on a very limited set of texts for analysis and the exclusion of social, economic, political and cultural aspects seriously weaken stylistics' claim to be unbiased analysis.

Conclusion:

Feminist stylistics shows the instinct to produce easily observable, potentially replicable analyses for the explanation of how gender issues materialize linguistically. It has embraced the 'interdisciplinary' and 'multimethodological' labels, which have resulted in a constant re-evaluation, further augmentation and subsequent betterment in relation to which models of analysis might be of better service to cater for how gender issues are encoded in texts. Feminist stylistics, so to say, cannot be a substitute for any other approaches but a complementary for them. So it is obvious that most of what the science of linguistics now does can be usefully related to literature, but there are some bridges to be built, and it is in the area of feminist stylistics that the opportunities for doing this are greatest.

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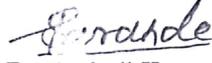


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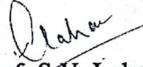
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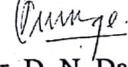
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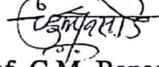
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