

INTRODUCTION

Needless to say, the impact of feminism on different branches of knowledge and science over the last four decades has been immense. The emergence of feminist approaches to numerous disciplines has been and continues to be noteworthy in, among other areas, peace studies, black studies, anthropology, philosophy, political science, history, nursing, education, sociology, economics, psychology and, of course, literary studies. The extremely wide range of strands within feminist literary theory and criticism prevents a unified and stable definition of its goals and principles. Moreover, this introduction affords no space to approach the depth and contradictions typical of a field as heterogeneous and multifarious as this one. In the last part of the 20th century different approaches to the study of literature from a feminist perspective have emerged: Liberal, radical, Marxist, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, postmodern, cultural, third world, lesbian and so forth.¹ I am well aware of the nuances and complexities one must bear in mind when dealing with concepts that have lately become highly contested such as “feminist,” “criticism,” “theory” or even “woman,” for that matter. While feminist criticism has traditionally fostered reconceptualizations of the very terms on which it is founded, for the sake of including diverse experiences and standpoints, the constant critique and questioning of concepts would at this point lead us nowhere except to useless theoretical anxieties. In this respect I share Susan Gubar’s objections to the intrusion of theoretical and metacritical thinking into feminist literary studies, in so far as they have managed to undermine terms such as “woman,” and thus have deprived the field of its central tenet. Specifically, she claims that throughout the 1990s, which she qualifies as the fourth stage of feminist literary criticism (further categorized as “metacritical dissension”), both identity politics feminists and poststructuralist feminists invalidated the word “woman.” And although she acknowledges the gains brought about by these lines of inquiry, namely, the ways in which they have shaped alternative methods to study culture and society, she nevertheless remains skeptical as to whether their excessive reliance on philosophy and postmodern modes of thinking actually adds anything to the advance of feminist literary criticism. As she puts it: “The consequence for criticism of a linguistic model deriving from philosophy has been to divorce feminist speculations from literary texts or to subordinate those texts to the epistemological, ideological, economic and political issues that supplanted literary history and aesthetic evaluation as the topics of writing about women” (126). In other words, feminist literary critics seem to have forsaken the original focus on the literary text and succumbed to the enticing influence of theoretical speculations that have marginalised the aesthetic. Gubar deplores the fact that terms such as “the self” or “woman” have be-



come illusory and empty categories, although she is not as naïve as to presuppose that the concept of woman can be easily defined. In fact, she is aware of the historical, linguistic and social situatedness of this and, for that matter, all other categories of analysis. However, she cautions against the “use of divisive and obfuscatory language” (130) among feminists, which can inadvertently damage the interests of feminist literary criticism. Gubar phrases “critical anorexia” the way in which “racialized identity politics made the word ‘women’ slim down to stand only for a very particularized kind of woman, whereas poststructuralists obliged the term to disappear altogether” (132). It logically follows that as feminist critics we can not disregard the elements on which our very discipline is grounded, namely, the notions of “woman” and “literature.” And while we can profit from the insights provided by the languages of identity politics and poststructuralism, which Gubar acknowledges, it is also true that “at this point they should be reinvented to deal with the here and now, in an activist framework that will inspire our students by addressing the societal conditions with which we must contend” (133).

In her 1999 volume *What Is a Woman?* Toril Moi expressed similar reservations about the poststructuralist theorizing of the concept “woman.” She argued that “poststructuralism (...) is too eager to lose itself in metaphysics” (xiv) and that it was extremely liberating to be able to assume that “there is anything intrinsically wrong with the word ‘woman’” (ix-x). Neither Gubar nor Moi seek to oversimplify the problematizing of the concept “woman.” They are simply concerned about the consequences that an ever unfixed and slippery characterization of woman would have for feminist criticism. We need to solidly establish, at least, some notions in order to cogently articulate our thinking. The concept of woman is one of those notions, despite the fact that it varies depending on a number of circumstances (social, political, national, economic, and so forth). These reflections were an adequate point of departure when I first thought about the orientation that a special number of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* on feminist literary criticism should have. Several topics came readily to mind. For example, I was interested in examining how the process of canonization has affected the current state of women’s literature as an academic discipline. In a similar vein, the institutionalization of feminist theory and criticism led me to pose the question: Should we recover the challenging strength and vitality present in the initial stages of the discipline? I was likewise concerned about the real applicability and/or usefulness of the sex/gender distinction for current analyses of women’s literature. At present, these and other ideas deserve to be rightfully addressed alongside the development of newer critical perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Among them, the notion of “post-feminism”

¹ For a detailed discussion of all these branches see Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder: Westview, 1998). Margaret McLaren addresses the same topic in the first chapter of *Feminism, Foucault and Disembodied Subjectivity* (New York: State U of New York P, 2002) 1-18

has recently become a privileged theme for feminist theory. This is a particularly problematic term because its meaning differs according to the critical outlook of those who use it. Thus, in the context of the 1980s media in which it originated, it made reference to a moment when women no longer needed to engage in ideological and political struggles against patriarchy because equality between the sexes had finally been achieved. From this point of view, the feminist movement was not only outdated but also irrelevant. This is the meaning that the mass media and political structures of the U.S. favored throughout the reactionary 1980s. However, the term may also be said to have positive connotations when viewed through a different lens. For example, when the prefix “post” suggests a moment that has seen the overcoming of the initial white-middle-class-heterosexist centeredness and proposed critical alternatives to articulate other experiences, such as those of black, low-class, lesbian or women of color (Chicanas, Asian-American, Native-American).² And yet, as far as the socio-political situations regarding women worldwide is concerned, I do not think we are going through a post-feminist phase. Conversely, the need to improve the living conditions of those less privileged and to ensure their individual rights seems today even more urgent. Let’s not be duped by abstract speculations about the “non-existence” of the self, or the “unfixed” nature of the subject when we come across visual and textual evidences to the contrary every day. As one of the contributors to this issue has observed: “Be willing to label your convictions feminist. Beware of the cynical manipulations of cynicism, of those who tell you that feminism is outmoded, whether they say it lost or won” (Judith Kegan Gardiner, qtd. in Gubar 166).

Some critics have also raised the question of a “third wave” in feminist theory. Having reached a post-feminist moment signaled by women’s success in a number of areas, they claim, it was logical that we pursued the degree of theoretical sophistication resulting from subjecting our original presuppositions to critical scrutiny. In this respect, the contribution of women of color, lesbians, queer theorists and post-colonial critics could very well make up a whole body of newer, third wave theories, without this necessarily indicating a negative phenomenon.³ At any rate, the debates about both “post-feminism” and a “third wave” are in no way exhausted and they probably will constitute matter for further discussions.

Perhaps terms such as “gynocritics” or “écriture feminine” sound irremediably dated nowadays, even though we keep working with the methodologies that both modes of inquiry provided way back in the 1970s. Similarly, we cannot say that the archaeological phase is over, as far as the need to retrieve lost texts and authors remains. However, it is certainly true that we no longer have to pose it as a

² To explore this approach see Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

³ For this issue see Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake eds. *Third Wave Agenda* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1997)

necessary strategy because the burying of women's literature in the past needs no further demonstration. Fortunately, we have also surpassed the stage where women's literature had to prove "good" enough or as good as men's to be worthy of serious critical consideration. Hence, I am especially concerned about what new or remarkable contributions we could make to the current status of feminist literary criticism and theory. As Catherine Belsey did in 2000, when the advent of the new millennium seemed to promise a radically different future for feminist criticism, I now ask myself if we could "devise some proposals, however tentative, about how feminist academic writing might challenge, stimulate, and promote the reader's production of ideas she makes her own" (159). This is, I think, a major consideration if we don't want to end up in a state of critical stagnation. Our writing as academic feminists must motivate readers to reach beyond what has already been seen and explored, and to break new ground in our endeavor to envision alternate speculative domains. As feminist scholars, our task consists in drawing our students into thoughtful and subtle discussions of the areas they explore. In preparing this *RCEI* special issue I hope to achieve precisely this goal and to show the diversity of perspectives, tendencies and outlooks that have emerged lately within our discipline. Obviously enough, the essays presented here illustrate to a certain extent, but could never fully represent *all the* diversity, given the annual output of publications on feminist literary and cultural criticism. I am happy to be able to bring together essays by scholars who enjoy international recognition but, more importantly, whose intellectual honesty and willingness to contribute important things to the discipline reflect their worth both as critics and as human beings. Their response to my call for papers was immediate and I would like to express my gratitude to all of them, hoping this collection of essays will, borrowing Catherine Belsey's words, "coax the reader to sit up and think" (159).

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