"Voices across Centuries: A Comparative Study of Feminist Expression in 18th-Century and 20th-Century Women Writers in English Literature"

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Abstract

This paper compares feminist concerns and strategies in selected 18th-century and 20th-century women writers in English literature. It situates early women's writing as "proto-feminist" — negotiating authorship, sexual politics, and economic dependency within patriarchal structures — and contrasts this with the explicitly politicized, theoretically informed feminist writing of the 20th century, which foregrounds subjectivity, language, and intersectional identities. Close readings of representative texts illuminate continuities (domestic critique, narrative self-fashioning, gendered surveillance) and ruptures (the emergence of consciousness-raising, formal experimentation, and intersectional awareness). The study argues that while 18th-century women laid the discursive and narrative groundwork for later feminist practice, 20th-century writers transformed those foundations into critical and experimental modes that reframed womanhood, power, and language.

Keywords: feminist criticism, 18th century, 20th century, women writers, narrative voice, domesticity, intersectionality

Introduction

Feminist literary inquiry traces its historical roots through a long, uneven development of women's writing and thought. The 18th century saw women authors negotiate authorship, marriage, and economic precarity in novels, essays, and poems that questioned social norms often indirectly or through narrative caution. By the 20th century, feminist writings had become both theoretically explicit and formally experimental, interrogating the structures of language, subjectivity, and power with new urgency. This paper compares representative writers from each period — focusing on how they articulate women's experiences, critique gendered institutions, and employ literary form — to show both continuity and transformation in feminist expression.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This is a comparative close-reading study combining historicist contextualization with feminist literary theory. Key theoretical lenses include: proto-feminist and liberal feminist perspectives (concerned with education, legal rights, and economic autonomy); second-wave feminism's emphasis on consciousness, patriarchy, and the private sphere; and later theoretical developments including intersectionality and poststructuralist critiques of language and subjectivity. Primary texts are read against social and legal histories of gender; secondary commentary is used to elucidate feminist concepts and trace shifts in rhetorical strategy.

Historical Context: 18th Century vs. 20th Century

18th Century: Constraints, Negotiations, and Proto-Feminism

The 18th century (broadly construed to include the long 18th century) was a period when women's legal and economic identities were tightly bound to marriage and male guardianship. Women writers often faced moral censure and precarious financial conditions; many published anonymously or under pseudonyms. Feminist argument in this era tends to be "proto-feminist" — advocating for education, moral seriousness, and limited legal reforms while using narrative strategies that negotiate social censure.

Common forms: epistolary and realist novels, conduct literature, sentimentalism, and early Gothic. Typical concerns: marriage as economic contract, female education, reputation, and the politics of sexual morality.

Representative figures: Frances Burney (Evelina, Cecilia), Mary Wollstonecraft (A Vindication of the Rights of Woman — late 18th century), Ann Radcliffe (Gothic), Eliza Haywood (early eighteenth-century novels and broadsides), and Charlotte Smith (poetry and novels that combine sensibility with social commentary).

20th Century: Theorized Feminism and Formal Experimentation

The 20th century encompassed major feminist waves and theoretical shifts: first-wave legal reforms (late 19th/early 20th), second-wave feminism (1960s–1980s) with its critique of domesticity and patriarchy, and later moves toward intersectionality and post-structuralist critiques of identity and language. Women writers in English used fiction, poetry, essays, and memoirs to dissect the private as political, question narrative authority, and experiment with form to reflect fragmented subjectivity.

Common forms: modernist psychological interiority, experimental narratives, confessional poetry, postcolonial and intersectional literatures. Typical concerns: autonomy and consciousness, sexual politics, race and class intersections, language as a site of power.

Representative figures: Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir (philosophical prose in French but influential in anglophone feminism), Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, and bell hooks in criticism.

Close Readings and Comparative Analysis

1. Narratives of Domesticity and Marriage

18th century — Frances Burney (e.g., *Evelina, Cecilia*):

Burney's novels foreground marriage markets, reputation, and the limited economic choices available to women. Protagonists navigate social rituals (ballrooms, drawing rooms, letters) where reputation determines marriageability and social survival. Burney's narrative voice often employs irony and social observation to reveal the gendered constraints behind polite society's manners.

20th century — Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*, *Mrs Dalloway*):

Woolf explicitly reframes "room" and income as preconditions for artistic creation. While Burney dramatizes the social negotiation of marriage, Woolf theorizes the institutional conditions (economic independence, private space) necessary for women's literary voices. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf's free indirect discourse collapses the boundary between inner thought and social performance, portraying the psychological cost of social roles.

Comparison:

Both centuries link marriage/domesticity to women's agency. However, 18th-century novels dramatize constraints and survival strategies within the social order, often with narrative irony that preserves social norms even while critiquing them; 20th-century texts more directly theorize structural prerequisites for autonomy and experiment with form to embody psychic interiority. The shift is from negotiation within constraints (18th c.) to theorized critique and formal experimentation (20th c.).

2. Authorship, Voice, and Narrative Authority

18th century — Mary Wollstonecraft and Eliza Haywood:

Wollstonecraft's political prose demands rational education and civic recognition for women; it uses Enlightenment rhetoric to argue for equality in reason. Haywood, who often wrote from within the marketplace of popular fiction, negotiates female desire and authorship, sometimes trading on sensational plots while inserting proto-feminist insights into women's sexual economies.

20th century — Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich:

Plath's confessional poetry exposes interior suffering and the gendered pressures of domestic life; her language violently fragments selfhood and reveals patriarchal constraints on speech. Adrienne Rich's poems and essays explicitly link personal experience to political structures, and later work advances feminist poetry that refuses containment and asserts a politics of language.

Comparison:

In the 18th century, authorship by women often required strategic positioning (anonymity, moral framing, epistolary distance) to be publishable; authority was negotiated via Enlightenment appeals to reason or via sentimental moral exemplarity. In the 20th century, women claim more explicit authorial authority, often using form—confessional voice, fragmentation, montage—to challenge the masculinist literary canon. The locus of the struggle shifts from gaining permission to speak to redefining the terms and forms of speech itself.

3. Sexual Politics and the Body

18th century — Ann Radcliffe and the Gothic Mode:

Radcliffe's Gothic novels stage anxieties about female vulnerability and the erotic gaze through landscapes, ruins, and threatening male figures. The Gothic allows a critique of patriarchal power by dramatizing female peril and interior fear, while often reinscribing normative endings (rescue, marriage).

20th century — Jean Rhys (*Wide Sargasso Sea*), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*):

Rhys rewrites colonial and gendered narratives by giving voice to a Creole woman isolated by patriarchal and racial forces; Morrison interrogates the brutal legacies of slavery on motherhood and female body politics. Both works place the female body at the center of historical violence and reclaim narrative agency for those previously silenced.

Comparison:

The Gothic's staging of female terror in the 18th century reveals anxieties about sexual transgression and male control, but often stops short of systemic critique. The 20th century moves beyond metaphorical terror to examine institutional and historical oppressions (race, colonialism, slavery) that materialize in female bodies, thus broadening feminist analysis to include intersecting power structures.

4. Education and Economic Independence

18th century — Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*):

Wollstonecraft argues that women's educational deprivation renders them dependent and ornamental, not virtuous citizens. Her approach is rationalist and reformist: educate women to be companions and moral agents.

20th century — Doris Lessing (*The Golden Notebook*), Virginia Woolf:

Lessing's fragmented novel depicts a woman writer's struggle with personal and political fragmentation; economic autonomy is one dimension of the crisis of identity. Woolf's essay links a literal "room" and income to intellectual freedom. Unlike Wollstonecraft's reformism, 20th-century arguments incorporate psychological realities and structural critiques, adding the cultural and linguistic conditions to the legal/economic demands.

Comparison:
Wollstonecraft lays foundational demands—education and legal rights—while 20th-century works complicate those demands by showing how culture, interiority, and language mediate women's capacities to exercise rights. The focus shifts from «should» (women should be educated) to «how» (what forms of subjectivity and language enable or disable autonomy).

5. Intersectionality and Expanded Horizons

18th century limitations:

Many 18th-century women writers addressed class and, to a lesser extent, race, but often within a limited national and social frame. Their feminist critiques were often centered on white, property-owning women's status.

20th century expansion:

The 20th century — especially its later decades — foregrounds intersectional concerns: race, colonialism, sexuality, and class become central to feminist critique. Writers such as Toni Morrison, bell hooks (critical essays), and Angela Carter (in some respects) bring race and postcolonial questions into feminist literary practice, complicating universalizing claims about womanhood.

Comparison:
The most striking rupture is the expansion of feminism's horizon. While 18th-century women often articulated powerful critiques of gender within their socio-legal contexts, 20th-century writers interrogate how gender intersects with race, colonial histories, and class, creating a more pluralistic and critical feminist discourse.

Formal Strategies: From Sentiment to Experimentation

18th-century women used genres—epistolary form, conduct manuals, sentimental plots, and Gothic tropes—to negotiate public censure and to encode critique within acceptable forms. Their strategies were often indirect but rhetorically sophisticated: irony, satire, moral exempla, and sentimental identification.

20th-century writers frequently break or bend form to mirror fragmented modern subjectivities and to resist patriarchal narrative closure. Stream of consciousness, montage, fragmentation, confessional lyric, and metafiction become tools for both aesthetic innovation and feminist critique. The formal evolution demonstrates not just stylistic change but a shift in the politics of representation: form becomes a site of feminist intervention.

Continuities: What Carries Over

1. **Preoccupation with voice and representation:** Both periods struggle over who may speak and how. 18th-century writers often sought voice within constraints; 20th-century writers insisted on redefining voice itself.
2. **Domestic critique:** The home remains a central site of gendered power across centuries.
3. **Use of narrative to reveal social norms:** Whether through satire or interior monologue, writers expose the rules governing gendered behavior.

Ruptures: What Changes

1. **Theorization of oppression:** 20th-century writings are more likely to analyze systems (patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism) rather than only dramatize individual suffering.
2. **Formal radicalism:** Modernism and postmodernism offer new formal possibilities that writers exploit to critique language and identity.
3. **Intersectionality and global perspectives:** Issues of race, empire, and sexuality become central rather than peripheral.

Conclusion

Eighteenth-century women writers laid essential groundwork for feminist literature: they articulated the experience of gendered constraint, experimented with narrative strategies to claim a voice, and began the public conversation about women's rights and education. The twentieth century transformed those narrative and political beginnings into more explicit, theoretically informed critiques that expanded feminism's scope—into language, psychology, race, and global power structures—and experimented boldly with form to make feminist argument itself a mode of literary innovation. The comparison reveals continuity in core anxieties (voice, domestic power, marriage) and a productive historical development in political reach and aesthetic means. Understanding these continuities and ruptures enriches both literary history and feminist theory, showing how

each century's writers responded to their material conditions and helped to refigure what feminist literature can be.

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