

## **Feminist Ideology as a Catalyst for Literary Revolution**

---

**Sanskriti Dangi**

Independent Researcher

---

Paper Received on 16-02-2026, Accepted on 17-03-2026

Published on 18-03-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.665

---

### **Abstract:**

Feminism as a named ideology is, historically speaking, quite young. The ideas it eventually organised had been circulating in literary culture for far longer—sometimes stated plainly, more often embedded in texts whose authors understood perfectly well that saying certain things too directly would cost them. This paper traces part of that history: from Mary Wollstonecraft's furious eighteenth-century argument that women's apparent inferiority was manufactured rather than innate, through the four broad phases of feminist thought, and into Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's contemporary insistence that culture is not fate. It also stops to examine what "feminine" and "feminist" actually mean as critical terms, since conflating them produces a particular kind of muddle that runs through a lot of literary commentary. The larger claim, argued throughout, is that literature has never been a neutral mirror of the world it inhabits. At its most alive, it has been an argument with that world.

**Keywords:** feminism, gender, patriarchy, Wollstonecraft, Adichie

### **Introduction**

Literary history has a habit of beginning feminist writing with a movement—the suffragists, the second wave, some conveniently dateable rupture—and the habit is not entirely wrong, but it is misleading enough to be worth correcting before anything else. Movements leave records. Manifestos get published, speeches get reported, campaigns get archived. What is harder to locate, and therefore easier to skip over, is the longer record of writers who were pressing against the same constraints before any organised politics existed to give that pressing a name. They were there. Their texts show it, if you know what to look for.

Margaret Fuller knew this problem from the inside. Her 1843 essay “The Great Lawsuit” arrives at its central observation with a dryness that has not dated at all: men who had accepted that other men were unjustly denied fair opportunities were being led, by a logic they could not easily refuse, toward acknowledging that “no women have had a fair chance” (Fuller 37). The point is not especially complicated. Once fairness becomes a live category—once you accept that people can be systematically wronged—the question of whether women qualify for its protections is not a radical one. It just requires you to follow the argument where it goes, which most of Fuller’s contemporaries preferred not to do.

Feminist literary criticism, at its most useful, is a method rather than a preference. It is the practice of asking, of any text: who is the speaking subject here, whose experience is being treated as the default human experience, and which voices have been pushed to the margins—and under what pressures, and in whose interests. The works of Wollstonecraft, Austen, Woolf, Adichie are not interchangeable. They are separated by centuries and continents and bear almost no formal resemblance to each other. What they share is a refusal to look away from things their respective worlds had quietly agreed to leave unexamined.

### **Feminine and Feminist: Understanding the Difference**

These two words get used interchangeably often enough that the confusion has become its own problem, one worth addressing head-on. Feminine, in the older literary and critical tradition, functions as a descriptive label for a set of attributes—softness, passivity, emotional accessibility, the readiness to subordinate one’s own needs to someone else’s—understood to belong naturally to women. Not argued for. Not justified. Simply assumed, the way the hardness of stone is assumed. The assumption was so total that questioning it looked less like a philosophical challenge and more like a failure of perception.

Feminist is a different kind of word altogether. It does not describe; it interrogates. A feminist reading of a text is one that refuses to accept gender as a natural given and keeps asking, instead, what work gender is doing in this particular text—why certain characters are granted interiority and others are not, why female desire so reliably presents as a problem to be managed, why the word “ambitious” carries such different freight when applied to a woman than when applied to a man.

The critical tradition that has kept asking these questions has never been comfortable, and it has not tried to be.

This distinction matters most when dealing with the canonical texts that present feminine passivity not just as normal but as a kind of ideal texts in which women who are gentle, self-effacing, and content with constraint are rewarded, while women who want more are punished or pathologized. A reading that accepts those terms is not neutral; it is an endorsement. Feminist criticism reads differently: it looks for what the text must work against, what it must suppress or punish, to sustain the vision of femininity it is selling. The gap between the ideal the text promotes and the life it depicts is usually where the most interesting reading happens.

### **The Waves of Feminism and Their Literary Influence**

The four-wave model of feminist history is a tool, and like most tools it has limitations that become visible when you press it too hard. The waves imply a cleanliness of transition—as if feminist concerns simply dissolved at the end of one period and reconstituted themselves into new concerns at the start of the next—that has nothing to do with how intellectual and political history actually works. Concerns bleed across periods. Writers in the 1890s were raising questions that would be identified, several decades later, as second-wave issues. The framework is nonetheless useful, not as precise chronology but as a rough map of which pressures were most legible at which moments.

The first wave's defining fight was over legal recognition. Women could not vote. Once married, they could not own property in most jurisdictions. University education was largely inaccessible, and entry into the professions was blocked almost entirely. The writing this produced tends to carry a specific kind of disciplined tension: the anger is real and close to the surface, but it has been shaped—sometimes visibly shaped, with the seams showing—into forms a contemporary readership might accept. Restraint in first-wave feminist writing is not always timidity. Frequently it is the only available tactic.

By the time the second wave gathered in the 1960s, several of those legal barriers had been removed, and the stubborn persistence of everything else had become the problem. Women could vote and attend university and hold jobs—and the culture's expectations of them, the daily texture of what was possible and what

was not, had changed remarkably little. The second wave moved the conversation inward, toward the psychological and social architecture that formal legal equality had left almost entirely intact. Literature from this period becomes more autobiographical, more insistent on treating personal experience as political evidence. Betty Friedan's "problem that has no name" named what a generation of women had been living without adequate language for.

Third-wave feminism arrived, in the 1990s, carrying a critique of the movements that preceded it: the earlier waves had spoken of "women" as though that were a uniform category, and the universalising move had required ignoring or minimising the very different situations of women whose experiences did not match the implicit norm. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality gave feminist criticism a vocabulary for holding race, class, sexuality, and disability alongside gender rather than treating gender as separable from all of them. The literary writing of the period reflects this in ways that sometimes make for an uncomfortable read, which is appropriate, because the reckoning it is performing is uncomfortable.

The fourth wave is ongoing, and writing about it from inside it requires a certain tentativeness. What seems clear is that digital communication has changed both the pace and the register of feminist public discourse in ways that have no real precedent. Social media has enabled kinds of collective mobilisation—and collective anger—that were not previously possible at that speed or scale. Contemporary feminist writing is more accessible in tone than its predecessors, more willing to engage with experiences that earlier feminist discourse sometimes treated as insufficiently serious: the exhaustion of constant low-level harassment, the particular indignity of being spoken over, the performance of gratitude for treatment that should simply be standard. The anger in this writing is, on the whole, less interested in managing itself for the comfort of readers who might find it excessive.

### **Feminism as a Social and Literary Force**

The reductive account of feminist literature treats it as political argument dressed in narrative clothing—as though the novels and essays were just manifestos that had made certain formal concessions in order to reach a wider audience. This is not quite right, and the error matters because it mischaracterises what literary writing actually does. Good feminist writing does not primarily convince. It alters perception. By the time a reader arrives at the recognition that a well-made feminist text is

building toward—and it is usually an arrival rather than a conversion, a sense of having seen something that was there all along—the experience is not one of having accepted a thesis. It is one of not being able to unsee something.

The mechanism is worth naming precisely: gender roles are not just described by literary culture, they are reproduced through it. A person who reads widely and deeply absorbs, through that reading, a set of intuitions about whose inner life is worth exploring in fiction, whose pain qualifies as tragedy, whose ambition is portrayed as admirable and whose as dangerous or sad. These intuitions are not typically delivered as arguments and are not typically received as arguments; they come in through the texture of narrative, below the threshold of conscious attention. Feminist criticism makes that process legible. Once the mechanism is visible, the intuitions it has been installing can be examined, and examining them is the beginning of not simply inheriting them.

The passage in Genesis—“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (*The Holy Bible*, Gen. 1.27)—keeps appearing in feminist theological and literary criticism, and not because anyone is trying to claim that Scripture is secretly a feminist document. The point is narrower and more useful: even within a tradition that has been deployed, extensively and with great confidence, to justify women’s subordination, the texts that constitute that tradition do not speak with one voice. They contain passages that pull against the uses to which the tradition has been put. Meaning is produced in the encounter between text and reader. Bring different questions to the same verses, and you get different answers. That is not relativism; it is how reading works.

### **Mary Wollstonecraft and Early Feminist Thought**

The description of Wollstonecraft as a founding figure has been repeated so many times it has acquired the quality of a filing system—she gets placed at the origin, acknowledged, and then moved past. Reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) without that framing is a different experience. What you find is a writer in the middle of an argument, not at the beginning of a tradition: responding to specific claims, naming specific adversaries, and making no apparent effort to modulate her contempt for the positions she is refuting. The anger in the text is not incidental. It is structural. Two and a half centuries of canonisation have not made it sound historical.

Her argument, at its core, was this: women appeared to be less intellectually capable than men because they had been raised in conditions almost perfectly designed to prevent intellectual development (Wollstonecraft 9). Education was the hinge. Not the decorative curriculum of accomplishments—drawing lessons, a little French, the right deportment—but serious education, the kind that develops the capacity for reason and independent judgment. Women were denied that, consistently and deliberately, and the result was exactly what you would expect: dependence, vanity, an over-investment in appearance and in the approval of men. Wollstonecraft's refusal was to accept these outcomes as evidence of women's natural character rather than as the predictable product of their circumstances.

The image she uses to describe what this process produces is botanical, and not gentle (Wollstonecraft 19):

*"The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity."*

The comparison has lasted because it is not sentimental. Women who are cultivated purely for their ornamental value wither before they have had the chance to find out what else they might have been, and Wollstonecraft does not soften this by finding the wilting beautiful. The responsibility lies with the conditions of cultivation, not with the flowers themselves. She also makes a pragmatic argument alongside the moral one: this is a waste, not only for the women concerned but for the society that might have benefited from their full development. Readers who were unmoved by injustice might yet be moved by waste. She understood her audience well enough to give them both.

### **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Contemporary Feminism**

*We Should All Be Feminists* originated as a TEDx talk in Lagos in 2012, and the published essay retains the properties of speech: short sentences, a preference for the concrete over the abstract, an address that feels personal rather than institutional (Adichie 8). Adichie is a writer entirely capable of theoretical complexity; this register is a choice, not a limitation. She is writing for readers who may not yet have the vocabulary for what she is describing—who have felt the things she names but have been told, in various ways, that the feeling is an overreaction, a misreading, a

problem with them rather than with the situation. The accessibility of the prose is part of the argument: feminism is not an advanced credential. It is an ordinary response to observable reality.

The passage most widely quoted from the essay earns its visibility (Adichie 47):

*“Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.”*

The force of this is philosophical before it is political. Culture presents itself, ordinarily, as something given—as the medium you were born into rather than something you are continuously producing and reproducing through every decision you make about how to treat other people. Adichie’s move is to refuse that presentation (Adichie 47–48). Calling culture a human product rather than a natural fact reframes the entire conversation: the question is no longer whether change is possible in principle, but whether the people who benefit from current arrangements are willing to do the work of changing them. The fatalism that feminist arguments so regularly encounter—the shrug, the suggestion that patriarchy is simply too old to be moved—is not a neutral observation. It is a choice to stop looking.

One of the more distinctive aspects of Adichie’s argument is its attention to what masculinity as currently constructed costs men (Adichie 26–27). The requirement that men be dominant, financially self-sufficient, emotionally contained, and always in control is not a set of privileges delivered without charge. It is a set of demands that many men cannot meet, and that damages the ones who cannot—or will not—perform meeting. By building this into her argument, Adichie changes what feminist advocacy looks like: less an accusation directed at men, more an account of a system that extracts a price from almost everyone, and a case for why almost everyone has an interest in dismantling it.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist literary history does not have a triumphant arc. That version of the story is available, but only if you selectively the evidence very selectively, and most serious accounts of the tradition have stopped trying to tell it. What the record actually shows is something more recursive: the same arguments surfacing across different centuries and contexts because the conditions that make them necessary keep reproducing themselves in new forms, sometimes subtler than before, sometimes less so. The gains are real. They are also contestable and have been contested, regularly, by forces that found them inconvenient.

Wollstonecraft's rage was directed at a world that withheld education from women and then cited their ignorance as proof of their natural inferiority. Fuller's irony was directed at men who accepted a logic of fairness and then stopped applying it at the gender line. Adichie's patience is directed at a culture that maintains the forms of equality while preserving most of the substance of hierarchy. These are not the same argument. The historical distances between them are real, and flattening them into a single continuous narrative does no favours to any of the three writers. But the thread connecting them—the insistence on naming what has been arranged to look inevitable—is unmistakable, and it has not run out.

Literature does not cause social change in any direct sense, and any claim that it does will not survive scrutiny for very long. What it does—and this is not a small thing—is change what readers are able to perceive, and eventually what they are able to tolerate. That process is slow, uneven, and impossible to trace with precision. But the writers who have constituted the feminist literary tradition—across languages, centuries, and genres—have been contributing to it steadily. The conversation they have been part of is not finished. Given the nature of what it is responding to, it probably will not be.

### **Works Cited**

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Fuller, Margaret. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Greeley and McElrath, 1845.
- The Holy Bible: King James Version. Thomas Nelson, 1611.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Edited by Carol H. Poston, W. W. Norton, 1988.

### **How to Cite this article?**

Dangi Sanskriti. "Feminist Ideology as a Catalyst for Literary Revolution." *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 2026, Oray's Publications, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.665.