



## Reimagining the Classics: Feminist Perspectives on Canonical Texts

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### Abstract

This paper explores feminist perspectives on canonical texts, reimagining classical literature through the lens of gender, power, and voice. “Canonical works have traditionally reflected patriarchal norms, often marginalizing or silencing female characters. Feminist literary criticism challenges these interpretations, offering new ways to understand these texts by reclaiming the voices of women and exposing the gendered structures embedded within them. Through the examination of key themes such as the male gaze, intersectionality, and the subversion of patriarchal norms, this paper seeks to demonstrate how feminist reinterpretations transform the reader's understanding of classical works. Case studies of iconic texts highlight how female characters are redefined, shifting from passive figures to empowered agents of change. The paper also considers the intersection of race, class, and gender in feminist critiques and how modern adaptations and retellings of canonical texts continue to challenge traditional narratives. By critically engaging with feminist theory and literature, this paper argues that these reimagined readings not only provide a more inclusive understanding of classical texts but also reveal their contemporary relevance in addressing issues of gender equality, empowerment, and social justice. This study contributes to feminist literary scholarship by deepening the dialogue between classical literature and feminist thought.

**Keywords:** Feminist literary criticism, Canonical texts, Gender roles, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Female empowerment, Male gaze, Rewriting classical literature, Feminist reimagination, Women's voices in literature

### Introduction

Canonical texts have long been revered as foundational pillars of literary tradition, shaping cultural and intellectual thought across generations. However, these works, predominantly written by men, often reflect the values and norms of patriarchal societies, reinforcing gender hierarchies and marginalizing the voices and experiences of women. Feminist literary criticism emerges as a powerful tool to challenge and reinterpret these traditional narratives, offering new perspectives that foreground the complexities of female identity, voice, and agency. By revisiting classical literature through a feminist lens, this paper seeks to explore how these





texts, historically seen as timeless and universal, can be reimagined to reflect the struggles, silences, and resistance of women. Through feminist theory, we uncover the ways in which women's voices have been silenced or relegated to the margins, and how their roles have been constructed to serve patriarchal interests. This paper examines the intersection of gender, power, and literature, analyzing key themes such as the male gaze, the subversion of patriarchal norms, and the reclamation of female agency. Additionally, it will highlight the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that issues of race, class, and sexuality are inextricably linked to gender in both the construction of female characters and feminist critiques. Through selected case studies of canonical texts, this paper illustrates how feminist interpretations not only challenge dominant readings but also offer alternative narratives that empower female characters, transforming them from passive figures to agents of their own destinies. In doing so, feminist literary criticism reveals the limitations of traditional readings while providing a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of these texts. Ultimately, this paper argues that by reimagining canonical works through feminist perspectives, we not only enhance the richness of literary interpretation but also engage in a critical dialogue that reflects contemporary struggles for gender equality, social justice, and empowerment.

### Overview of Canonical Texts

Canonical literature refers to a body of works that have been widely accepted as culturally significant, enduring, and representative of the highest standards of artistic and intellectual achievement. These texts, often written by prominent authors from historically dominant cultures, have shaped literary traditions and are typically included in academic curricula, anthologies, and critical discussions. The canon is frequently composed of works that reflect the values, norms, and ideologies of the time and place in which they were written, with many focusing on universal themes such as morality, human nature, and social order. Traditionally, canonical literature has been interpreted through a lens of objectivity, with an emphasis on timelessness, universality, and aesthetic merit. Critics and scholars have long viewed these works as embodying the essence of literary excellence, often disregarding the social and cultural contexts that shaped them. This approach tends to uphold the authority of the text while marginalizing or overlooking the representation of gender, race, and class. The traditional interpretation of canonical texts typically centers on male protagonists, and women are often portrayed as secondary characters, existing in roles that reflect patriarchal values such as submissiveness, domesticity, and passivity. These readings have historically reinforced dominant ideologies and contributed to the exclusion of diverse voices, especially those of women and marginalized groups. However, in recent decades, these conventional interpretations have been increasingly challenged by feminist, postcolonial, and other critical approaches, which seek to expose the underlying biases and limitations of the canon. By questioning what is considered universal and who gets to be represented within these works, scholars have opened new avenues for understanding canonical literature as a reflection of the power structures and social dynamics of its time, offering reinterpretations that include diverse perspectives and experiences that had previously been ignored.





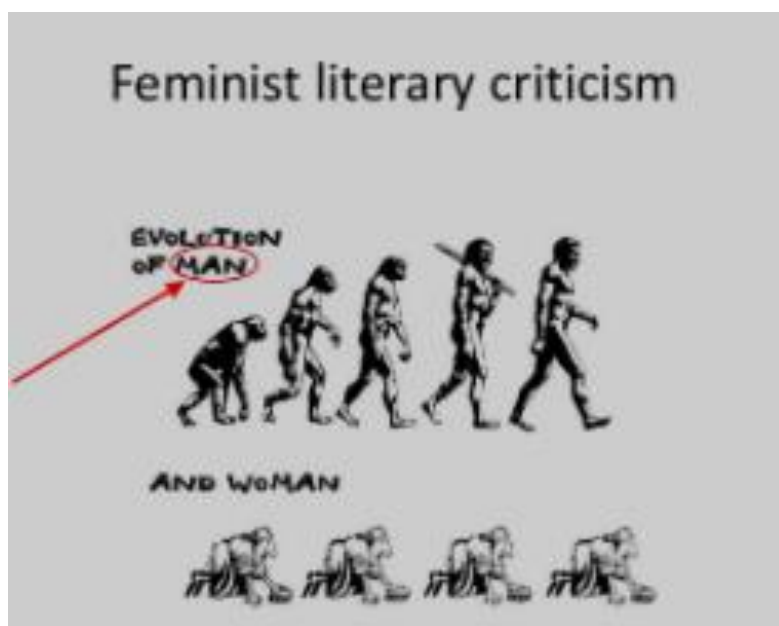
## Gender, Power, and Voice in Canonical Texts Gender Roles in Classical Literature

In classical literature, the roles of women are often defined by the gender norms and societal expectations of the time. Women are frequently portrayed as passive, submissive, and confined to domestic or secondary roles, often serving as foils to male protagonists or as symbolic representations of virtue, purity, or temptation. These portrayals reflect the deeply entrenched patriarchal values in societies that prioritized male authority and relegated women to the periphery. Iconic works such as *The Odyssey* and *Othello* illustrate this, where female characters are largely defined in relation to men—whether as wives, mothers, or temptresses—rarely as independent agents of their own destinies. These traditional depictions not only limit the scope of female experience but also reinforce the idea that women’s primary roles are within the domestic sphere, subject to male control and protection.

A recurring theme in canonical literature is the silencing and oppression of women, both physically and metaphorically. Female characters are often denied the ability to express themselves fully or to assert their agency in a meaningful way. This silencing manifests in various forms—women are either voiceless, reduced to silence by external forces, or their voices are ignored or suppressed when they challenge patriarchal norms. In works like *King Lear* or *Antigone*, women's defiance is met with tragedy, highlighting how women who attempt to break free from societal constraints are often punished”. This recurring theme of female silencing serves to reinforce patriarchal power structures, where women are not just silent but rendered invisible or insignificant in the grand narrative of male heroism.

Feminist literary criticism offers strategies to reclaim and reimagine women’s voices in these classical texts. “Feminist scholars have reinterpreted female characters, shifting the focus from their subjugation to their acts of resistance and agency. For example, in re-readings of *The Odyssey*, Penelope is not just a faithful wife but a figure of quiet strength and intelligence, using her wit to maintain power in a world that seeks to oppress her. Similarly, feminist re-readings of *Antigone* highlight her moral courage and defiance of patriarchal authority as a form of resistance, reclaiming her voice as a symbol of political and ethical power. These reinterpretations aim to give depth and complexity to female characters, emphasizing their strength, resilience, and capacity for rebellion. By doing so, feminist critics not only restore women’s voices in classical texts but also challenge the traditional narratives that have long upheld male dominance, making space for a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of literary history.





**Source: Anil Awad's Quest For Literature: Feminist Approach to Literary Criticism**

### **Impact of Feminist Reinterpretations Transformation of Reader's Perspective**

#### **Transformation of Reader's Perspective**

Feminist reinterpretations of classical texts significantly shift the way readers perceive these works by unveiling the often-overlooked gender dynamics that shape narratives and character portrayals. Where traditional readings might have celebrated male heroism and authority, feminist readings focus on the silenced voices and marginalization of female characters, reframing these stories from a gender-conscious perspective. By highlighting themes of oppression, agency, and resistance in women's roles, feminist interpretations encourage readers to question the societal norms embedded in classical literature. This transformation often reveals that what was once considered universal or timeless in these texts is, in fact, a reflection of patriarchal values, making readers more critical of how gender and power operate within these narratives. As a result, readers come away with a more nuanced and critical understanding of classical literature, seeing these texts not as fixed entities but as cultural artifacts that can be reimagined through contemporary lenses.

#### **Contemporary Relevance**

Feminist perspectives on canonical texts resonate strongly with contemporary issues surrounding gender equality by emphasizing the need to recognize and challenge patriarchal structures that persist in modern society. These reinterpretations shed light on the historical roots of gender discrimination, making it easier to draw parallels between the struggles of women in classical literature and those faced by women today. By exploring themes of silencing, agency, and power dynamics in classical works, feminist critiques align with ongoing conversations about women's rights, representation, and autonomy in various fields such as





politics, business, and media. They underscore the fact that the issues faced by female characters in these texts—such as confinement to traditional roles, lack of agency, or subjugation—mirror the challenges faced by many women today. Thus, feminist re-readings of canonical literature not only deepen our understanding of historical gender roles but also serve as a powerful tool for advocating gender equality and social justice in the present.

### Challenges and Criticisms

Feminist reinterpretations of canonical texts are not without their challenges and criticisms. Some critics argue that these readings impose modern values onto historical works, distorting the original context in which they were written. This approach is sometimes seen as anachronistic, as it applies contemporary feminist ideals to societies where gender norms were vastly different, and the authors may not have intended for their female characters to be seen through such a lens. Additionally, critics of feminist literary criticism argue that it can sometimes reduce complex characters and narratives to simplistic gender binaries, overlooking other important dimensions like class, race, or historical context. Another critique is that feminist readings may privilege female characters at the expense of male ones, leading to an unbalanced interpretation. Despite these criticisms, feminist reinterpretations continue to offer valuable insights into how literature reflects and perpetuates social power structures, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of classical texts.

### Intersectionality in Feminist Critique

Intersectionality in feminist critique is a crucial framework that expands feminist analysis beyond gender to consider how various social categories such as race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity intersect to shape the experiences of women and marginalized groups. Coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality addresses the limitations of traditional feminist discourse, which often centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women, overlooking the unique struggles faced by women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from different socio-economic backgrounds. In canonical literature, intersectional feminist critique reveals how these multiple axes of identity influence the way female characters are portrayed and marginalized. For instance, women of color in classical works are often doubly oppressed, subjected to both patriarchal and racial discrimination, which traditional feminist readings may not fully address. Intersectionality allows critics to uncover the layered forms of oppression these characters face and explore how their experiences differ from those of their white counterparts. By applying intersectionality, feminist scholars can analyze how these interlocking identities create a more nuanced understanding of power, privilege, and marginalization within literary texts. For example, in *Othello*, an intersectional reading might focus on how Desdemona's gender intersects with her racialized relationships with Othello, exploring the complexities of their union in a racially stratified society. Similarly, in works like *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, intersectionality highlights how race, class, and gender oppression are intertwined in the protagonist's experiences. Intersectional feminist critique emphasizes that gender cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in conjunction with other forms of identity that shape one's lived experiences. This approach enriches feminist





interpretations of canonical texts, making them more inclusive and reflective of the diverse realities of women's lives". Ultimately, intersectionality in feminist critique ensures that literary analysis encompasses a broader, more equitable understanding of the human condition.

### Review of literature

(Reuter, 2008) studied "Penelope Differently: Feminist Re-visions of Myth" and said that This thesis explores the intersections of feminist theory, mythology, and poetry through an examination of feminist readings of the Penelope story. It makes use of Rosi Braidotti's theory, which draws on the work of Judith Butler on self-narratives and Michel Foucault's theory of subjectivity and memory. Another issue discussed in the thesis is dispossession, which highlights the ethical concerns related to our identities and tales.

(Bowler & Cox, 2010) studied "Introduction to Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting, Revising and Rewriting the Past" and said that The articles collected here were presented at a three-day interdisciplinary symposium that took place in 2008 at the University of Wales, Lampeter. At the conference, people mostly talked on flexibility and the connections between the past and the present. It acknowledged adaptation as a phenomenon that pervades many aspects of modern life and commented on the metatextual and intertextual exchanges between various sectors of society and artistic expression. At the heart of the conference was an attempt to reignite artistic endeavors and generate new perspectives on our place in history, culture, and the future.

(Graham, 2012) studied "A Remembrance of Things (Best) Forgotten: the 'allegorical past' and the Feminist Imagination" and said that Set in New York City in the 1960s, *Mad Men* portrays sexism in the workplace prior to the feminist movement in the United States. Although the show is defended as feminist, its feminist producers argue that it demonstrates how feminist philosophy and religion have been influenced by the figurative past. They ask whether we've become numb and have lost touch with the sexual revolution, and if that's the case, whether a new feminist legacy wave is required.

(Duncanson-Hales, 2014) studied "Re-Imagining Text - Re-Imagining Hermeneutics" and said that If we want to explore unexplored territory and challenge conventional knowledge in today's digital environment, we must study religious literature. By taking a phenomenological approach to classical hermeneutics and refocusing it on the "science of the text," Paul Ricoeur helps bring together the modern world, the textual world, and interpreters. As Ricoeur sees Dasein (Being) as "being-in-the-world," meaning can transcend physical boundaries, traditionality/Traditions as a chain of interpretations, productive imagination, and metaphoric truth, the philosophical investigation into the metaphoric transfer from text to life is enriched.

(Col et al., 2017) studied "Why do we read the classics?" and said that Because of its historical, ethical, and epistemological nature, the anthropological corpus has sparked debate. With an emphasis on the question "Why read the classics?" the journal "Shortcuts" aims to challenge the historical, interpretative, and analytical arguments put out by anthropologists. It gives six





academic responses to the topic of who or what created the anthropological canon and why we should keep it, change it, or throw it out.

(Celestrin, 2018) studied “Re-Imagining the Victorian Classics: Postcolonial Feminist Rewritings of Emily Brontë” and said that The term "post-colonialism" describes an academic movement that examines the legacy of colonialism in all its facets, including politics, society, and culture. It emerged amid the worldwide uprising against colonial powers, and writers played a crucial role in its formation. Postcolonial writers reevaluate colonial literature and imperial discourse by questioning the production of "knowledges" and decentering the former, which portrays colonized people as inert and helpless.

(Lewis, 2018) studied “Anna Jackson’s I, Clodia: Catullus, women’s voices, and feminist implications” and said that I, Clodia by Anna Jackson goes into the literary reception of Catullus, establishing Clodia as a poet and a member of the classical tradition. Sensitive and well-read, she gives her own criticism and creative methods in response to Catullus's poetry. By recasting Clodia as a discerning reader and skilled poet, this book challenges the concept that female writers operate in a post-feminist environment and functions as a feminist text.

(Antico, 2020) studied “Re-Imagining Tradition: Women’s Leadership And Authority In The Roman Catholic Church” and said that Traditional Catholic doctrines on virginity, childbirth, and martyrdom have been challenged by feminist scholars. Despite indications of women leadership in the early church, men currently dominate the Church's hierarchy. Despite her humble origins, the author defied the Church's prohibition on women in leadership roles and traditional gender roles. In order to disprove these claims, the author extensively researched the positions, arguments, and history of the early Christian movement and notable women within it.

(Forner, 2020) studied “Distant Pasts Reimagined: Encountering the Political Present in 21st-Century Opera” and said that My dissertation focuses on four operas—one from 2009 and one from 2016—performed in the United States and Europe, and I examine their "distant pasts." The creators of these operas claim that they respond to the current political atmosphere by reworking classic human narratives. Their proposed operational "networks of comprehension" account for geographical and cultural contexts as well as various subject positions. Examining the operas' unconventional use of time, narrative, and drama—highlighting the intersections of feminism, racism, religion, and secularism—this study conducts in-depth interviews with pertinent parties.

(Bowen, 2021) studied “Toward a New Classics: A De- and Reconstruction of The Classics in the Classroom and Beyond” and said that The public and scholarly evaluation of The Classics has prompted additional self-reflection regarding the program's history, aims, and curriculum. This has led to conversations about racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and sex in the Classics. A number of conservative groups, including white supremacists and anti-feminists, are staunch proponents of this position. Here are a few examples: anti-feminists praising patriarchal societies, Ted Cruz quoting Cicero, and Identity Europe using historical figures.

(Giusti & Rimell, 2021) studied “VERGIL AND THE FEMININE: INTRODUCTION” and said that This special edition of Vergilius responds to Elaine Showalter's 1985 prediction that





feminist studies necessitate more radical re-evaluations of earlier masters. Although Vergil's works have been analyzed from a feminist perspective, they are not frequently seen as fertile ground for women's and gender studies, in contrast to Homer, the Greek tragedians, and Ovid. Very few modern academics have sought to examine Vergil via a feminist lens, particularly one that emphasizes gender.

(Guest, 2022) studied “Feminist literary revisionism and the #MeToo movement” and said that Circe, A Thousand Ships, Ariadne, and The Silence of the Girls are just a few examples of the feminist mythological retellings that have recently gained popularity in response to the #MeToo movement. One way authors might participate in the #MeToo movement is by using Penelope as a starting point for revisionary mythmaking. The car is luxurious and fulfilling. Studies of novels are more fruitful than those of poetry collections or collections of short stories due of the novels' connections to epics.

(Hamerlynck, 2023) studied “She Still Sees Herself in Artemis: The Chaos Magic of Feminist Mythological Retellings” and said that A exhibition of inventive writing with an emphasis on feminist concerns, the thesis uses poetry to retell tales from classical culture. We talk about 20th-century poets and feminist writers. An analytical introduction, a chapbook of thirteen poems and one flash fiction piece, and a theme-related assignment from earlier sessions make up the portfolio. The works make deliberate use of themes and allusions from other works through the use of footnotes and epitaphs. The thesis imagines a legacy-rich future and reclaims voices that have been marginalized.

## Subversion of Patriarchal Norms Challenging Traditional Narratives

### Challenging Traditional Narratives

Feminist interpretations actively subvert patriarchal norms embedded in canonical texts by challenging the traditional narratives that portray women as passive, dependent, or secondary to male characters. “These readings disrupt the idea that male perspectives and experiences are universal, exposing the inherent gender biases within the text. For instance, in works like *The Odyssey*, feminist critics deconstruct the glorification of male heroism and instead focus on the roles of women like Penelope, who, though traditionally cast as the faithful wife, can be seen as a figure of resilience and power who navigates a patriarchal society with intelligence and strategy. By reframing these narratives, feminist interpretations shift the emphasis from male-centered achievements to the overlooked struggles and strengths of women, revealing the ways in which these texts perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. Feminist readings thus disrupt the dominant gender narratives and offer a more complex understanding of the dynamics between power, gender, and society in classical literature.

### Agency and Empowerment

Through feminist reinterpretations, female characters who have traditionally been portrayed as passive or oppressed are recast as empowered agents of change. Characters such as Shakespeare's Ophelia in *Hamlet* or Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who were often seen as victims of their circumstances, are viewed through a feminist lens as women exercising agency







within the limitations of their societal roles. For example, Ophelia's madness can be seen as a form of protest against the constraints placed upon her by patriarchal power, rather than simply a tragic result of male manipulation. Similarly, Nora's decision to leave her husband at the end of *A Doll's House* becomes an act of self-empowerment, symbolizing her rejection of the repressive norms that had governed her life. These feminist readings reclaim the agency of female characters by emphasizing their strength, resistance, and capacity to make transformative decisions, even within oppressive contexts.

### Alternative Endings

Feminist reimaginings of classical stories often provide alternative readings or endings that empower female characters and subvert traditional patriarchal conclusions. For instance, in retellings like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which reimagines Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, is given a backstory that humanizes her, portraying her as a victim of colonial and patriarchal oppression rather than a villain. In feminist rewritings, female characters are often granted more autonomy, voice, and control over their destinies, challenging the typical endings that leave them punished, silenced, or submissive. Additionally, alternative interpretations of figures like Medea or Antigone recast them as powerful agents who defy societal expectations and assert their own moral authority, even at great personal cost. These reimaginings provide a space for female empowerment, enabling feminist scholars to challenge the ways canonical texts have historically marginalized or diminished the agency of women, while offering more inclusive and progressive narratives.

### The Role of Silence in Canonical Texts

In canonical texts, silence often plays a complex and multifaceted role, particularly in relation to female characters. Silence can represent submission, marginalization, or enforced invisibility, as women are frequently denied the power of voice within patriarchal structures. This lack of agency often manifests in characters who are either voiceless, whose voices are ignored, or who remain silent as a form of survival in oppressive environments. In works such as Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona's silencing culminates in her tragic death, symbolizing the devastating consequences of a woman who is unheard or dismissed. Similarly, in *The Odyssey*, Penelope's silence is imposed by societal expectations of loyalty and passivity, despite her inner strength and resilience. Silence, in these cases, serves as a metaphor for women's broader social repression, where their thoughts, desires, and autonomy are either stifled or rendered invisible by patriarchal norms.

However, feminist criticism also recognizes that silence can be a form of resistance. Female characters may employ silence strategically, either as a way to navigate patriarchal control or to subvert it in subtle ways. In works like *Antigone*, the titular character's defiance of King Creon's orders through her quiet yet resolute actions can be seen as a powerful form of silent resistance, illustrating that silence does not always equate to submission. Moreover, feminist reinterpretations of silence explore the possibility of reclaiming it as a space of empowerment, where women, though voiceless in traditional narratives, can be reimagined as exercising agency in their silence. By focusing on what is left unsaid, feminist critics argue that silence is





not an absence of power, but rather a complex, layered response to domination. In this way, silence becomes a focal point for understanding how canonical texts perpetuate gender inequality and how feminist critiques can reveal deeper, more nuanced interpretations of women's roles in literature.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, feminist reinterpretations of canonical texts offer a transformative lens that challenges traditional patriarchal readings, bringing to light the complexities of gender, power, and voice. By reclaiming and reimagining female characters, these critiques expose the silencing and marginalization of women while highlighting their resilience, agency, and resistance". Feminist perspectives not only deepen our understanding of classical literature but also resonate with contemporary struggles for gender equality. Ultimately, they allow us to view these texts as dynamic cultural artifacts that can evolve and inspire more inclusive, equitable interpretations for modern readers.

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