

**Digital Narratives and the Future of English Studies Literature, Language,
Media, and AI in the 21st Century**

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STANZALEAF PUBLICATION

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Digital Narratives and the Future of English Studies: Literature, Language, Media, and AI in the 21st Century is a multidisciplinary edited volume that explores the rapidly evolving relationship between English Studies and contemporary digital culture. Published by **Stanzaleaf Publication**, the book brings together scholarly perspectives on literature, language, media, artificial intelligence, digital communication, creative practices, pedagogy, and emerging technologies.

The volume examines how digital transformation is reshaping the production, interpretation, teaching, and circulation of literary and linguistic knowledge. It addresses significant developments such as artificial intelligence in literary and language studies, machine creativity, digital storytelling, multimodal narratives, social-media discourse, innovative methods in English language learning, global communication, gender and representation, and technology-driven approaches to recruitment and talent management.

By connecting traditional literary and linguistic inquiry with the opportunities and challenges of the digital age, the book highlights the expanding scope of English Studies in the twenty-first century. It demonstrates how literature and language increasingly interact with artificial intelligence, digital media, virtual platforms, multimodal communication, and data-driven technologies, while continuing to engage with fundamental concerns such as creativity, identity, culture, representation, ethics, communication, and human experience.

A distinctive strength of this edited collection lies in its interdisciplinary orientation. The chapters move beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries and examine English Studies in relation to education, media studies, communication, cultural studies, management, technology, and artificial intelligence. Such an approach enables readers to understand how emerging technological environments are creating new forms of authorship, readership, language learning, cultural participation, and professional communication.

The volume also maintains a critical and human-centred perspective. While recognizing the potential of artificial intelligence and digital technologies to support creativity, learning, communication, and research, the chapters also examine important concerns surrounding authorship, originality, algorithmic bias, digital inequality, ethics, privacy, cultural diversity, and the responsible use of technology.

Designed for teachers, researchers, academicians, postgraduate students, research scholars, language educators, literary critics, media researchers, and interdisciplinary scholars, this book provides a valuable platform for understanding the transformation of English Studies in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Ultimately, *Digital Narratives and the Future of English Studies: Literature, Language, Media, and AI in the 21st Century* presents English Studies as a dynamic and future-oriented field—one that continues to evolve by responding critically and creatively to new technologies, new media environments, and new forms of human expression.

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7. Gender, Society, and Representation in Contemporary Literary Studies

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Abstract

Gender has become one of the most productive categories of analysis in contemporary literary studies because literary texts do not merely reflect existing social ideas about women, men, sexuality, family, labour, identity, and power; they also participate in constructing, questioning, reproducing, and transforming those ideas. Contemporary gender criticism has therefore moved beyond the simple identification of “strong” or “weak” female characters toward a more complex examination of how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, disability, age, migration, colonial history, and institutional power. This chapter examines the relationship among gender, society, and representation through feminist criticism, intersectionality, queer theory, masculinity studies, postcolonial feminism, and cultural studies. Particular attention is given to gender performativity, voice and silence, the body, domestic and public space, labour, sexuality, stereotypes, counter-narratives, publishing institutions, canon formation, and reader reception. The chapter argues that representation must be studied at two interconnected levels: within literary texts and within the institutions that determine which writers are published, reviewed, taught, translated, and remembered. Empirical evidence from literary publishing demonstrates that gendered disparities can persist even in cultural institutions committed to intellectual and artistic value. At the same time, contemporary literature increasingly presents plural, resistant, fluid, and intersectional identities that challenge traditional binary representations. The chapter concludes that gender-sensitive literary studies should not prescribe a single ideological interpretation of texts but should provide readers with analytical tools for understanding how narratives organize visibility, authority, embodiment, identity, and social difference.

Keywords: Gender, Representation, Feminist Literary Criticism, Intersectionality, Queer Theory, Society, Masculinity, Literary Canon, Identity, Contemporary Literature

1. Representation as a Literary and Social Question

Literature has always participated in the cultural production of gender. Myths, epics, religious narratives, romances, novels, plays, poems, autobiographies, and popular fiction contain assumptions about what women and men should desire, how families should function, whose speech possesses authority, which bodies are considered respectable, and which forms of behaviour are rewarded or punished. For this reason, gender analysis cannot be reduced to counting male and female characters. The deeper critical question concerns representation. Stuart Hall argues that representation is a process through which meaning is produced and circulated within culture. Representation does not simply provide a transparent copy of reality; it organizes reality through language, images, categories, narratives, and cultural codes. Literary representation is therefore socially significant because stories help readers imagine what kinds of people, relationships, identities, and futures are possible.

A literary text may reinforce dominant social expectations. It may also expose their contradictions. The obedient wife, heroic warrior, sacrificial mother, seductive woman, rational patriarch, rebellious daughter, queer outsider, unmarried woman, feminized man, migrant mother, working-class woman, or gender-nonconforming character does not appear in cultural isolation. Each is located within a history of social meanings.

Contemporary literary studies therefore asks not merely who appears in a text, but:

Who is allowed to speak?

Whose experience receives narrative attention?

Which characters possess agency?

Whose desires are considered legitimate?

Which identities are marginalized?

How do gender and social institutions interact?

Who is published, reviewed, taught, and remembered?

These questions move gender criticism from character description toward an analysis of culture and power.

2. From Feminist Criticism to Gender Studies

Feminist literary criticism transformed literary studies by questioning the historical marginalization of women as writers, characters, critics, and cultural authorities. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* remains foundational because it connects literary production with material conditions. Woolf asks readers to consider why literary history contains fewer recognized women writers and draws attention to education, economic independence, domestic expectations, privacy, and institutional opportunity.

Later feminist critics expanded this inquiry.

Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism called for the study of women's writing as a literary tradition rather than treating women writers only in relation to male-authored texts. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar similarly investigated the cultural constraints surrounding nineteenth-century women writers in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Yet feminist criticism itself developed through debate. Early feminist models were criticized for treating "woman" as though it described one universal experience. Black feminism, postcolonial feminism, queer theory, and intersectional criticism demonstrated that gender cannot be separated from race, class, nationality, colonial history, sexuality, caste, and other structures.

bell hooks emphasizes that gender inequality cannot be analysed adequately while ignoring race and class. Chandra Talpade Mohanty similarly critiques approaches that construct women outside the West as one homogeneous oppressed group rather than recognizing historical and cultural differences. Contemporary gender criticism has consequently become more plural.

It asks not only how women are represented but how gender itself is constructed.

3. Gender as Performance and Cultural Construction

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* significantly altered gender studies by arguing that gender should not be understood simply as an internal identity expressed outwardly. Gender is continually produced through repeated social acts, expectations, gestures, language, dress, bodily practices, and cultural norms.

This idea of performativity is particularly useful in literary studies.

Characters repeatedly “do” gender.

A male character may demonstrate masculinity by suppressing emotion, exercising authority, competing economically, protecting family honour, displaying physical strength, or rejecting behaviours culturally marked as feminine. A female character may be expected to display modesty, domestic competence, maternal sacrifice, beauty, obedience, emotional care, or sexual restraint.

Literary texts can naturalize these behaviours by presenting them as inevitable. Alternatively, they can reveal their constructed character by allowing characters to refuse or fail to perform them.

A woman who rejects marriage, a father who embraces emotional vulnerability, a queer character who refuses binary categorization, or a male character who resists violence can expose the instability of conventional gender roles. Literature is therefore a powerful site for investigating the tension between social expectation and individual identity.

4. An Intersectional Model of Literary Representation

Contemporary gender studies increasingly rejects analysis that isolates gender from other aspects of social identity.

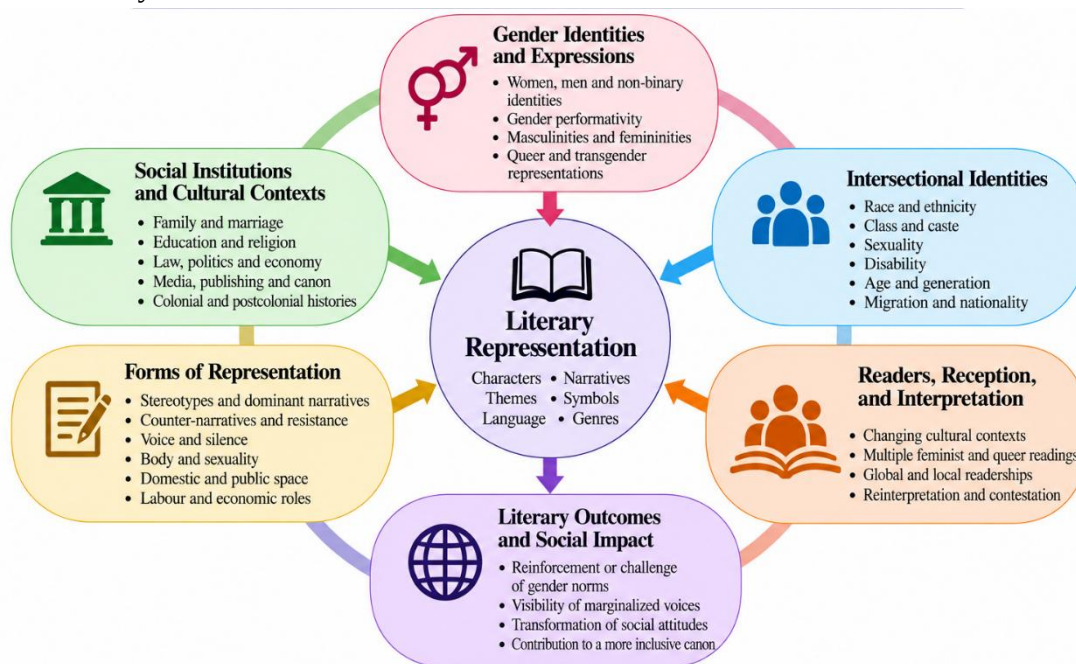


Figure 1. Gender, Society, and Representation: An Intersectional Literary Studies Model.

The figure places the literary text at the centre of four interconnected analytical domains: gender construction, social structures, intersectional identities, and representation/reception. The model emphasizes that literary gender analysis should move in several directions at once. It examines characters and narrative form, but also families, institutions, labour, culture, race, class, caste, sexuality, publishing, readership, and canon formation. The critical objective is not simply to identify inequality but to examine how narrative structures make social power visible or invisible. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality to explain how forms of inequality overlap rather than operating independently. Her original legal analysis demonstrated that Black

women's experiences could not be adequately understood by examining racism and sexism as entirely separate structures. The concept has subsequently become highly influential across the humanities. In literary studies, an intersectional analysis may ask how the experiences of a wealthy woman differ from those of a working-class woman, how caste affects gendered agency, how disability changes representations of the body, or how migration alters family and sexual identities. A character is never only gendered. The character may also be racialized, classed, nationalized, sexualized, disabled, religiously identified, aged, or positioned within colonial and postcolonial histories.

5. Voice, Silence, and Narrative Authority

One of the most useful ways to study gender in literature is to examine who controls narration. A character may be physically present throughout a novel yet possess little narrative authority. Conversely, a character marginalized within the fictional society may gain significant power if the narrative allows that character to speak, remember, reinterpret, or challenge dominant accounts. Voice therefore becomes a political and aesthetic question. First-person narratives can make experiences previously considered private or insignificant central to literary attention. Diaries, memoirs, letters, testimony, and autobiographical fiction have been particularly important for writers exploring domestic labour, sexuality, motherhood, violence, migration, mental distress, and social exclusion. Silence can also be complex.

A silent character is not necessarily powerless. Silence may indicate fear, exclusion, resistance, refusal, trauma, or strategic self-protection.

Gender criticism therefore asks how silence functions within a particular social context rather than automatically interpreting speech as empowerment and silence as submission.

Narrative authority also operates through focalization.

Whose consciousness does the reader enter?

Whose emotional response receives explanation?

Whose violence is rationalized?

Whose suffering is treated as background?

These formal questions demonstrate why gender analysis must attend to literary technique rather than only plot.

6. The Gendered Body

Literature frequently turns the body into a site of social meaning.

Bodies are disciplined through expectations concerning beauty, sexuality, clothing, reproduction, age, race, ability, respectability, and health. Women's bodies in literature have historically been associated with beauty, maternity, sexuality, vulnerability, temptation, and domesticity. Male bodies have often been associated with strength, labour, military power, discipline, or authority.

Contemporary writing increasingly destabilizes these conventional associations. Women writers have explored menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, ageing, illness, bodily autonomy, sexual desire, and violence from perspectives previously marginalized within canonical literature. Queer and trans writing further challenges assumptions that bodies naturally correspond to fixed gender identities.

Disability studies complicates gender representation by examining how ideals of femininity and masculinity depend upon assumptions about bodily normality, independence, productivity, and appearance. The literary body is therefore never merely biological. It is interpreted socially.

7. Domestic Space and Public Space

Space is also gendered.

Traditional social structures have often associated women with the domestic sphere and men with public, political, economic, and professional life.

Literature has repeatedly reflected and contested this division.

The house can signify safety, belonging, inheritance, imprisonment, labour, memory, or surveillance. A kitchen, bedroom, workplace, street, university, courtroom, or marketplace may carry different meanings depending upon who is permitted to occupy it and under what conditions. Woolf's famous argument that a woman writer requires money and a room of her own is therefore both literal and symbolic.

Creative freedom depends upon material space.

Contemporary literature expands these questions into migration, urban life, public transportation, digital space, workplaces, and transnational environments.

Gendered access to space becomes a way of analysing power.

Who can travel safely?

Who owns property?

Who can leave home?

Who performs unpaid domestic labour?

Who receives private space for intellectual activity?

These questions connect literary geography with social structures.

8. Labour, Care, and Economic Representation

Gender is also organized through work.

Literary texts can reveal differences between paid and unpaid labour, domestic and professional work, visible and invisible work, and productive and reproductive labour.

Care work is particularly important.

Cooking, cleaning, childcare, emotional support, elder care, and household management have historically been feminized and often represented as natural expressions of love rather than labour.

Contemporary literary criticism asks what happens when such work is made visible.

A domestic narrative can become a study of economics.

A family novel can become a study of gendered labour.

A migration narrative can reveal global systems in which women leave their own families to perform care work for others.

Literature therefore allows intimate experience and social structure to be read together.

9. Masculinity as a Gendered Construction

Gender studies is not synonymous with the study of women.

Masculinity must also be treated as historically and culturally constructed.

R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity describes culturally dominant forms of masculinity associated with authority, heterosexuality, toughness, competitiveness, economic power, and control.

Not every man possesses or desires these characteristics.

Indeed, literary narratives frequently depict the costs of masculine expectation.

Men may be pressured to conceal vulnerability, pursue economic success, use violence, demonstrate sexual dominance, or avoid behaviours perceived as feminine.

War literature, sports narratives, family novels, postcolonial fiction, working-class literature, and coming-of-age narratives provide especially useful contexts for examining masculine identity.

Gender analysis therefore does not position men simply as a uniform dominant group.

It asks how different masculinities are produced through class, sexuality, race, age, colonialism, occupation, and social institutions.

10. Queer Theory and the Critique of the Binary

Queer theory further transforms literary gender analysis by questioning the assumption that gender and sexuality exist only through stable binary categories.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work demonstrates how literary and cultural texts organize relations among gender, desire, homosociality, and sexuality.

Butler similarly questions fixed distinctions between masculine and feminine identity.

Queer reading consequently examines what a text makes culturally normal and what it marks as deviant, impossible, hidden, or unspeakable.

Such analysis is not limited to texts with explicitly LGBTQ+ characters.

A queer reading can examine marriage plots, same-sex friendship, compulsory heterosexuality, gender disguise, secrecy, desire, family structures, or narrative endings.

Contemporary literature has also expanded representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, non-binary, and gender-fluid experience.

These representations make visible identities historically suppressed, coded, caricatured, or excluded.

However, visibility alone does not guarantee complex representation.

A queer character can still be reduced to stereotype.

Gender criticism therefore asks whether a character possesses psychological depth, narrative agency, relationships, history, and meaningful participation in the text.

11. Intersectionality: Gender, Race, Class, Caste, and Colonialism

Intersectionality becomes especially important in postcolonial and transnational literary studies.

The category "woman" does not erase differences in power among women.

A privileged woman may employ a poorer woman for domestic labour.

A colonizing woman may benefit from racial hierarchy even while experiencing patriarchal restriction.

An upper-caste woman and a Dalit woman may experience gender through very different social institutions.

A migrant woman may encounter forms of vulnerability shaped simultaneously by gender, nationality, employment, language, and legal status.

Literature can dramatize these intersections in ways abstract theory sometimes cannot. A novel places individuals inside families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, institutions, and historical events. Readers witness how structures combine in everyday experience. Postcolonial feminist criticism has therefore challenged universalizing accounts of women's experience. Mohanty warns against representing women in the Global South as one undifferentiated category of victims. Such representation can reproduce colonial assumptions even when presented as feminist concern. Contemporary literary studies instead seeks historically situated interpretations.

12. Stereotype, Counter-Story, and Resistant Representation

Representation becomes especially important when particular groups have historically appeared through restricted narrative types.

The submissive woman.

The seductive woman.

The angry feminist.

The hypermasculine man.

The effeminate queer man.

The tragic queer character.

The exoticized postcolonial woman.

The self-sacrificing mother.

The sexually available woman of colour.

The stereotype reduces difference and complexity.

Counter-narratives resist such simplification by allowing characters previously treated as objects of representation to become subjects of narrative.

A counter-story may retell mythology from the viewpoint of a marginalized woman, rewrite a canonical novel from the perspective of a silenced character, or reinterpret domestic history through queer experience.

Revision and retelling have consequently become important strategies within contemporary literature.

Fairy tales, myths, epics, colonial narratives, and canonical novels are repeatedly rewritten to expose assumptions embedded in earlier versions.

The purpose is not necessarily to discard earlier literature.

Instead, revision demonstrates that literary meaning remains open to contestation.

13. Gender beyond the Text: Publishing and Literary Institutions

A major development in contemporary literary studies is the recognition that representation cannot be studied only inside fictional worlds.

Literature also exists within institutions.

Publishers decide which manuscripts appear in print.

Editors select contributors.

Reviewers determine which books receive critical attention.

Prize committees confer prestige.

Universities construct syllabi.

Anthologies define traditions.

Translation industries determine which texts cross linguistic boundaries.

These processes influence which literary voices become culturally visible.

Research on creative industries continues to show that authorship and recognition can be shaped by structural conditions. A 2024 Cambridge University Press study by Dotan Oliar and Marliese Dalton, drawing on more than fourteen million U.S. copyright registrations from 1978–2012, notes persistent gender differences across creative categories. The authors also observe that the publishing industry can contain a high proportion of women workers while still displaying gendered patterns in authorship and recognition (Oliar and Dalton).

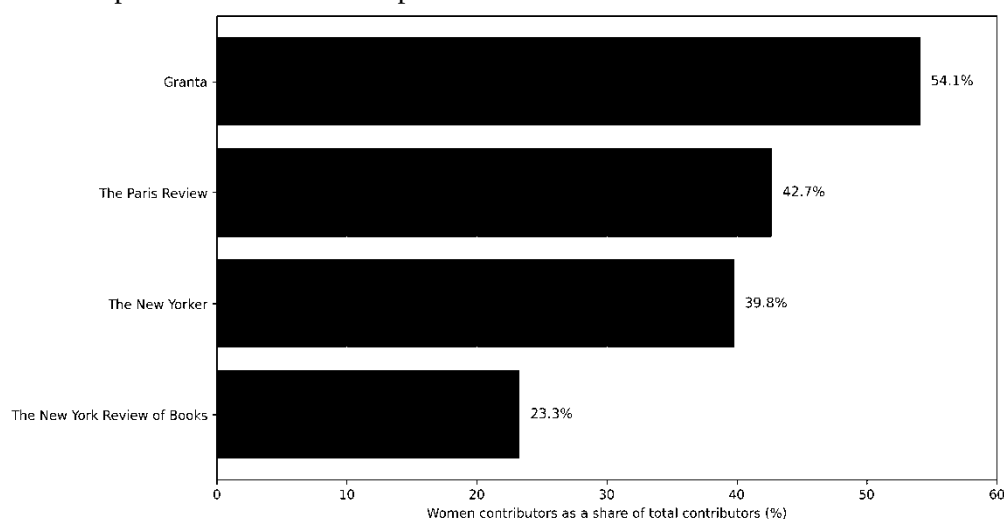
Literary representation is therefore both **textual and institutional**.

14. Evidence from Literary Publishing

The VIDA Count became influential because it moved debates about literary representation from impression to measurable evidence.

VIDA examined gender patterns among contributors, reviewers, and authors reviewed by prominent literary publications.

The 2017 Count provides a useful example.



Source: 2017 VIDA Count figures as reported by Publishers Weekly and summarized in a University of Pretoria study.

Graph 1. Women's Representation in Selected Literary Publications, 2017.

The selected data show substantial variation. Women accounted for approximately 54.1 percent of contributors at *Granta*, compared with approximately 42.7 percent at *The Paris Review*, 39.8 percent at *The New Yorker*, and 23.3 percent at *The New York Review of Books*.

The figures should not be interpreted as measurements of literary quality. Nor do they establish why the differences occurred.

Their importance lies elsewhere.

They demonstrate that cultural representation can be studied institutionally.

The question is not merely whether literature contains complex women characters. It is also whether women and other historically marginalized writers gain comparable opportunities to publish, review, receive reviews, enter syllabi, and acquire prestige.

Moreover, contemporary analysis must move beyond a male/female binary. Later literary-counting projects increasingly recognize the need to consider race, non-binary identity, sexuality, disability, and other categories.

Quantitative evidence does not replace literary interpretation.

It provides another level of context.

15. Canon Formation and the Recovery of Marginalized Writing

The literary canon has historically been presented as though it emerged naturally from timeless artistic excellence.

Contemporary literary studies has questioned this assumption.

Canon formation is influenced by education, publishing, criticism, archives, prizes, libraries, translation, and institutional authority.

Feminist criticism played a major role in recovering writers whose works had disappeared from conventional literary histories.

Recovery involves more than adding several women writers to an existing reading list.

It can alter how literary history itself is understood.

If previously neglected diaries, slave narratives, domestic fiction, working-class writing, queer texts, oral narratives, and writings by women of colour are included, established ideas about literary periods and genres may change.

Canon revision therefore demonstrates that absence is not necessarily evidence that marginalized communities produced less significant literature.

Absence may also reflect the history of selection.

16. Gender Representation in Popular and Digital Culture

Contemporary literary studies increasingly extends beyond conventional print literature.

Fan fiction, web fiction, graphic narratives, digital storytelling, online reading communities, and social-media writing have created new environments for gender representation.

Digital platforms can allow marginalized communities to produce and circulate stories without traditional publishing gatekeepers.

Fan fiction is particularly significant because readers can become writers.

Characters excluded from canonical narratives can be rewritten. Heteronormative relationships can be reimagined. Minor characters can become central figures. Alternative genders, sexualities, and endings can be explored.

Yet digital spaces are not automatically egalitarian.

Commercial platforms have algorithms, moderation systems, economic structures, and cultural hierarchies.

Zhang Ni's discussion of Chinese *danmei*, for example, demonstrates how digital literary cultures can become spaces where gender, sexuality, labour, fandom, markets, and censorship interact.

Contemporary representation must therefore be studied across both print and digital systems.

17. Reader Reception and the Changing Meaning of Gender

Readers also participate in representation.

Literary meaning is not fixed permanently at publication.

A character considered rebellious in one historical period may appear conservative in another.

A relationship once interpreted primarily as friendship may acquire new significance through queer criticism.

A nineteenth-century marriage plot may be reread through economic analysis, disability studies, or postcolonial feminism.

Readers bring their own cultural positions to texts.

Gender criticism therefore produces reinterpretation rather than merely correction.

A feminist reading, queer reading, Marxist-feminist reading, or intersectional reading can reveal different structures within the same work.

These approaches need not produce identical conclusions.

The value of contemporary literary criticism lies partly in its capacity to sustain evidence-based disagreement.

18. Teaching Gender and Representation Critically

Gender-based literary teaching should encourage interpretation rather than replace one rigid reading with another.

Students can compare representations across periods.

They can examine how the same archetype changes across retellings.

They can analyse dialogue, focalization, symbolism, narrative voice, characterization, endings, and silence.

Teachers can ask:

How does the text define acceptable femininity or masculinity?

Which behaviour receives punishment?

How are sexuality and family connected?

Who possesses economic power?

Whose perspective controls the narrative?

Which identities remain outside the story?

What happens when gender is considered together with class, caste, race, or migration?

These questions preserve close reading while extending it into social analysis.

A useful classroom method is **comparative representation**.

Students might compare a canonical fairy tale with a contemporary feminist rewriting, a colonial novel with a postcolonial response, or a traditional marriage plot with a queer reinterpretation.

The purpose is not to tell students what they must think.

It is to help them recognize how texts construct social possibilities.

19. Methodological Directions for Contemporary Research

Research on gender and literary representation can combine several methods.

Close reading examines language, symbolism, voice, imagery, narrative form, and characterization.

Historical analysis situates gender within specific social periods rather than imposing contemporary assumptions without context.

Discourse analysis examines how recurring language constructs gendered subjects.
Intersectional analysis investigates overlapping structures of identity and inequality.
Archival research can recover marginalized writers and publication histories.
Reception studies examines how readers and critics interpret gender representation.
Book-history approaches analyse publishers, reviews, prizes, translation, and circulation.
Digital humanities can measure patterns across large textual corpora or publishing datasets.
The strongest contemporary research often combines textual interpretation with institutional or historical context.

20. Toward a More Complex Understanding of Representation

The development of feminist, queer, intersectional, postcolonial, masculinity, disability, and trans studies has made one principle increasingly clear:

Representation is not a simple matter of positive versus negative images.

A “strong female character” can remain stereotypical if strength is represented only as adopting conventionally masculine behaviour.

A vulnerable male character may challenge gender hierarchy more effectively than a heroic one.

A queer character does not automatically create progressive representation if that character exists only as a narrative device.

A marginalized character may appear frequently yet still be denied narrative voice.

Literary criticism must therefore analyse structure, complexity, agency, and context.

The essential questions are:

Who gets to be fully human within the narrative?

Whose contradictions are permitted?

Whose interior life matters?

Who receives a future?

Such questions move representation beyond numerical visibility toward literary significance.

Conclusion

Gender remains a central category within contemporary literary studies because literature participates in the cultural organization of identity, power, embodiment, family, labour, sexuality, and social expectation. Feminist literary criticism established the importance of examining women's exclusion from literary history and the representation of women within texts. Subsequent developments in intersectionality, queer theory, postcolonial feminism, masculinity studies, disability studies, and trans studies have expanded the field by demonstrating that gender cannot be treated as an isolated or universally experienced category. Contemporary gender criticism therefore operates across several levels. At the textual level, it examines narrative voice, characterization, bodies, space, sexuality, labour, silence, and agency. At the social level, it considers family, culture, class, caste, race, migration, religion, education, and economic power. At the institutional level, it examines publishers, reviewers, prizes, translation, curricula, and canon formation. At the readerly level, it investigates how changing cultural contexts generate new interpretations.

The publishing evidence discussed in this chapter further demonstrates why the institutional dimension matters. Literary culture does not simply evaluate texts after they have been produced;

it participates in determining which texts become visible. A critically responsible literary study of gender should therefore avoid two extremes. It should not treat literature as socially neutral. But it should also not reduce literary texts to simple illustrations of predetermined political arguments. Literature possesses ambiguity, contradiction, aesthetic form, historical specificity, irony, and competing perspectives. These qualities make literary representation especially valuable for gender studies. Stories allow readers to encounter the tensions between social structures and individual lives. They show how norms are inherited, performed, resisted, transformed, and sometimes reproduced by those who oppose them. The continuing importance of gender criticism lies precisely in this complexity. Its task is not merely to identify whether a literary work contains men, women, or queer characters. Its task is to examine how literature distributes voice, agency, visibility, desire, legitimacy, and cultural value. In this sense, gender criticism remains central not only to understanding representation but to understanding literature's broader relationship with society.

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