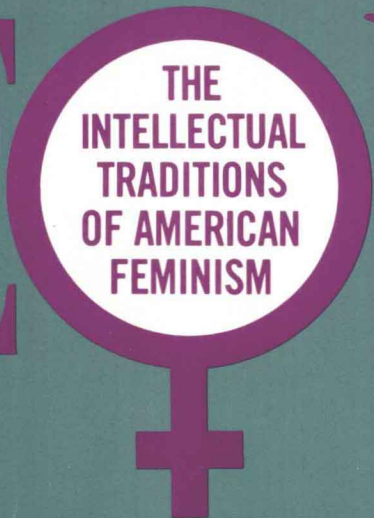


"A superbly intelligent, lucid guide to one of the great movements  
of the modern world."—Catharine Stimpson

# FEMINIST THEORY

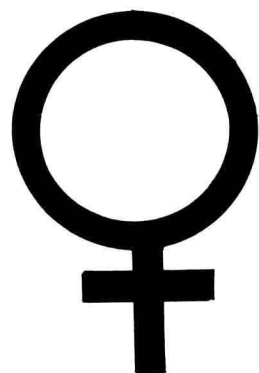


THE  
INTELLECTUAL  
TRADITIONS  
OF AMERICAN  
FEMINISM

NEW EXPANDED EDITION

*Josephine Donovan*

# *Feminist Theory*



*The Intellectual Traditions  
of American Feminism*

NEW EXPANDED EDITION

---

*Josephine Donovan*

*A Frederick Ungar Book*

CONTINUUM • NEW YORK

1997

The Continuum Publishing Company  
370 Lexington Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

Copyright © 1985 by Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc.  
New material Copyright © 1992 by Josephine Donovan

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or  
by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording,  
or otherwise, without the written permission of  
The Continuum Publishing Company.

Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Donovan, Josephine, 1941—

Feminist theory : the intellectual traditions of American feminism  
/ Josephine Donovan. — New expanded ed.

p.      cm.

"A Frederick Ungar book."

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8264-0617-3

1. Feminist theory. 2. Feminism—United States. I. Title.

HQ1190.D66 1992

305.42'01—dc20

91-38756

CIP

# *Feminist Theory*

ALSO BY JOSEPHINE DONOVAN

*Uncle Tom's Cabin: Evil, Affliction, and Redemptive Love*

*After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Cather,  
Wharton, and Glasgow*

*New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition*

*Sarah Orne Jewett*

*Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory* (edited)

*Gnosticism in Modern Literature*

*To*  
*Anne Rhodenbaugh Barrett*

*Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God*  
—Susan B. Anthony

# ***Preface to the First Edition***

*Illiterate people will not  
keep their freedom.*  
Nikki Giovanni, 1977

**L**iteracy can imply more than the ability to read. It can mean having a knowledge of one's history, of one's origins; having a world view that is indigenous to one's people and not imposed by others.

George Santayana reminded an earlier generation that those who are ignorant of their history are condemned to repeat it. Nikki Giovanni's more recent observation underscores that freedom is sustained by critical knowledge of one's self, one's community, and the world.

Women will remain trapped in age-old patterns of enslavement and they will lose hard-won freedoms unless they learn and transmit their history. An important part of that history is the extensive body of feminist theory that has been developed over the centuries. Women remain illiterate without a knowledge of this theory.

This book is the result of a seminar on feminist theory I have taught at various universities for over a decade. As such, it is a teaching book meant to present and interpret the main traditions of feminist theory in the context of their historical and philosophical roots.

The book is designed for the student and general reader who wish to gain an understanding of the intellectual traditions of American feminist theory. It should also be of use to scholars, for it provides a convenient



and comprehensive summary of the diverse philosophical strains that make up the intellectual heritage of modern feminism.

I hope too that it may serve as a kind of handbook for the feminist activist who wishes to learn more about feminist theory, and for women (and men) in all walks of life who want to know what feminism really is. For it has little or nothing to do with the frivolous notion of "women's liberation" perpetrated in the media. Nor, ultimately, is it about "dressing for success" or becoming the first woman to have a finger on the nuclear trigger.

Finally, I hope that this book may help in the formulation of future feminist theory. One of the sad conclusions I have reached in writing this book is that feminists have re-invented the wheel a number of times. While the theories developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s came as a kind of revelation of many of us at the time, it has since become clear, as we have learned about earlier feminist movements, that there was little really new in what these "radicals" had to say. Much of it had been said, repeatedly, over a century before. This eclipse of feminist theory must not happen again.

To an extent this is a personal book. I have stressed those works and ideas that seemed to me, intellectually and emotionally, the most significant. While it includes the major theoretical traditions and is therefore a comprehensive study, the book does not purport to be exhaustively complete, nor to detail each particular group's oppression. I have attempted to be objective, in the sense of being faithful to the demands of rigorous intellectual standards of judgment, but the opinions and views expressed, as well as the selections, emphases, and arrangement, are obviously my own. In this sense no scholarship can claim to be wholly objective.

A few notes of explanation are in order. The book is about the American feminist tradition; it includes only those British or European theories that have had a significant influence on American feminism. Second, I have elected to include liberal citations from the theorists themselves because I wanted to convey the flavor of their rhetoric as well as the substance of their ideas, and so as to be as faithful as possible to the detail of their thought. Third, I have used the terms "first wave" and "second wave" to designate the nineteenth-century women's rights movement and contemporary movement, respectively. I have called the nineteenth-century campaign the "women's rights," rather than the "woman's rights" movement, as it was then called, because the latter term seems awkward now. Similarly, I use the term "feminist" even though it was not then current. Also, for convenience I often use the term "American" as an adjective instead of "United States."

I would like to thank the students who participated in my seminars on feminist theory at the Universities of Kentucky and New Hampshire, Bowdoin College, and George Washington University; Pam Elam and Barbara White who carefully read the manuscript and provided helpful suggestions and criticism; the following people for their various contributions

to the making of this book: Karen Beckwith, Greta Reed, Charlotte Stewart, and Philip Winsor; and to thank for their encouragement over the years: Fannie J. LeMoine, Nelly Furman, Robert O. Evans, Gail Pass, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, my parents, and especially my sister, Ann Devigne Donovan.

Josephine Donovan  
*Portsmouth, New Hampshire*

# ***Preface to the Expanded Edition***

**I** write the preface to this updated, revised edition of *Feminist Theory* in the summer of 1991, eight years after the manuscript of the first edition was completed. The volume and quality of feminist theory produced during this period—roughly the decade of the 1980s—is staggering. We are in the midst of, and part of, an historic intellectual renaissance.

The main change between the first and second editions is the addition of a final chapter (8), in which I attempt to indicate the major directions in the most recent feminist theory. I have made no changes in the main text of the first edition, except for a few necessary updates, especially in the notes, and a few minor stylistic revisions and corrections.

In addition to the persons I acknowledged in the preface to the first edition, I would like to thank the following for their contributions—whether intellectual, moral, or material—to the production of this second edition: Evelyn Newlyn, Jana Sawicki, Carol Adams, Barbara White, Marilyn Emerick, Evander Lomke, and my students at the University of Maine.

Josephine Donovan

# Contents

---

<i>Preface to the First Edition</i>	xi
<i>Preface to the Expanded Edition</i>	xiv
<i>1 Enlightenment Liberal Feminism</i>	1
<i>2 Cultural Feminism</i>	31
<i>3 Feminism and Marxism</i>	65
<i>4 Feminism and Freudianism</i>	91
<i>5 Feminism and Existentialism</i>	117
<i>6 Radical Feminism</i>	141
<i>7 The New Feminist Moral Vision</i>	171
<i>8 The Eighties and Beyond</i>	187
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	251
<i>Index</i>	263

# 1 *Enlightenment Liberal Feminism*

*All I ask of our brethren  
is, that they will take their  
feet from off our necks . . .*

Sarah Grimké, 1837

On January 3, 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft completed the first major work of feminist theory in history: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It was to dominate subsequent feminist thought. Four months previously, in September 1791, during the early phases of the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges had issued a street pamphlet in Paris entitled *Les Droits de la femme* (The Rights of Woman). She was later guillotined. The year before, in 1790, Judith Sargent Murray, an American, had published "On the Equality of the Sexes" in Massachusetts. And even earlier, in the midst of the American Revolution, Abigail Adams suggested to her husband, John, that women should have some "voice, or Representation," in the "new Code of Laws" being drawn for the nation.<sup>1</sup>

These eighteenth-century feminists were responding to the tide of revolutionary fervor that was sweeping the Western world. Theories developed during the so-called Enlightenment or Age of Reason were being put into practice: the idea, for example, that people have certain inalienable or "natural" rights upon which governments may not intrude was at the philosophical heart of both the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789). Feminists hoped to assure that women be considered entitled to the same natural rights as men. Indeed, Mary Wollstonecraft dedicated the *Vindication* to French minister Talleyrand, urging him that if women were excluded from the new French constitution, France would remain a tyranny.<sup>2</sup> But

the male theorists who developed and enforced the natural rights doctrine unfortunately did not accept the feminist position. In order to understand why this was and to specify the nature of Enlightenment feminist theory, it is necessary to study the theoretical origins of the natural rights doctrine and the intellectual world of Enlightenment liberalism in which it arose.

Thinkers in the Age of Enlightenment—a period which may be loosely defined as the late seventeenth through the late eighteenth centuries—were concerned to re-impose an order on a world which had philosophically “fallen apart” due to various scientific discoveries. The hierarchical “great chain of being” which ordered the medieval cosmos had been fatally challenged by such discoveries as Galileo’s of the movement of the earth, published in 1632, which disproved the geocentric basis of Ptolemaic astronomy, itself the backbone of the medieval cosmological system.

A new synthesis was developed by Sir Isaac Newton whose *Principia Mathematica* (1687) laid down the fundamental paradigm of the Enlightenment world view: that the entire cosmos is governed by a few simple, immutable mathematical laws. Indeed, these laws were themselves reducible to one fundamental theorem, the law of universal gravitation. The Newtonian paradigm—that the physical universe operates according to simple, rational laws—became the governing metaphor of the age. If the physical world were ordered by a few basic laws, knowable through human reason, so too must be the moral world, the political world, and the aesthetic world. Descartes, for example, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637) had determined that a few “clear and distinct ideas,” known through the “light of reason,” provide irrefutable principles of knowledge. In each area theorists ascertained the basic principles that describe or prescribe behavior.

Political philosophers developed the idea that certain natural rights or natural laws, known through the exercise of reason, exist a priori. They thus established one of the most important moral ideas of the modern world: that each individual has certain inherent or “natural” rights. This premise is stated most eloquently in the American Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Ernst Cassirer characterized the Enlightenment rationalist world view as neo-Stoic.<sup>4</sup> As in the ancient Stoic view, the world was seen to work rationally, according to mathematical, “natural” laws. Each individual had access, autarchically, to these laws, because each individual had a God-given rational faculty. Each, independently, could extract from

the particulars of the situation the fundamental general laws or principles held to exist a priori. All minds, therefore, while fundamentally isolated and independent, were presumed nevertheless to work in the same mechanical way. All could follow reason to the same conclusions.

The mechanical metaphor, which saw the world essentially as a great clock and God as the great clock-winder, was in many ways a deficient paradigm; for, it left out—because it could not explain—basic areas of reality. It neglected, most importantly, what we might call the subjective world: the realm of the emotions and the nonrational to which were relegated questions of aesthetic and moral value. The Newtonian paradigm presumed that all which did not operate according to reason, according to mathematical principles of mechanism, was Other, that is, secondary, not significant, less than real, not nameable. Into this category fell women, according to the view of male liberal thinkers.

The Newtonian world view therefore postulated a fundamental dissociation or split between the public world and physical world of the cosmos, on the one hand, which were governed by reason, and on the other hand, the fringe marginal world to which were relegated such non-rational matters as emotional engagements, personal idiosyncrasies, questions of faith, questions of aesthetic and moral judgment, and women.

This neo-Stoical view also included the presumption that the rational world is superior to, and must control, the non-rational; that order must be imposed upon the non-ordered, the marginal, the Other world. Descartes, for example, wrote a treatise on the passions in which he argued that one must learn to master one's emotions, to keep them subdued.<sup>5</sup>

The assertion of the primacy of human reason and of its right to rule all other aspects of reality led to a certain conceit or arrogance, indeed to a kind of "species," or male, chauvinism. For, inherent in the vaunting of human (male) reason is the idea that rational beings are the lords of creation and have the right to impose their "reason" on all who lack it—women, nonhuman creatures, and the earth itself. The pernicious implications of this arrogation will be discussed below.

Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—as before and since—the assumption that women belonged in the home as wives and mothers was nearly universal. By the middle and late eighteenth century, and particularly into the nineteenth century, historical circumstances, notably the industrial revolution, separated the work place from the home, isolating women in the domestic sphere. With mechanized factories and the decline of cottage industries the public world of work became split off from the private world of the home as never before. Such tendencies, too, reinforced the Enlightenment identification of rationalism with the public sphere, and the non-rational and the moral with the private sphere and with women.<sup>6</sup>

Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, which appeared first in 1765–69, codified the view that women had no legal, public exis-

tence. As Susan Moller Okin points out, "The exclusion of women, particularly after marriage, from legal personhood, had a firm foundation in the common law fiction of *couverture*."<sup>7</sup> This fiction was articulated by Blackstone as follows:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover* she performs everything. . . .<sup>8</sup>

This meant in effect that married women had no property rights, no control over inheritance, no control over custody, and no right to bring civil suit. All these points became central issues in the nineteenth-century women's rights movement.

The presumption that women belong in the family under the aegis of their husband was central to male liberal theorists, even those like John Locke who espoused, at least theoretically, natural rights for all people. Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) is considered the gospel of natural rights doctrine and is the main ideological source of the Declaration of Independence. In it he states unequivocally:

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind which will but consult it, that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions (II.6).<sup>9</sup>

The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule (IV. 22, p. 411).

Unfortunately, Locke did not mean man in the generic sense, but in the specific sense of the male of the species. For, later in the *Treatise* he states quite specifically that husbands are to be allowed authority over their wives and children, and although this is not an absolute authority, he does not spell out its limits. "But the husband and wife . . . will unavoidably sometimes have different wills too. It being necessary that . . . the rule . . . be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man's share as the abler and the stronger" (VII. 82, p. 435).

Several scholars have pointed out that Locke's theory necessitates conjugal subordination of women because it is rooted in the concept of private property. Locke stressed the importance of private property as a central factor in self-determination, in part as a means of wresting power from the crown and of securing a place protected from monarchical intrusion. But central to the protection of private property was the right of



(male) inheritance. For this reason monogamy and the control of one's wife became of paramount importance, so that the property would remain within the family.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the "individuals" who form a social contract for the protection of their lives, their fortunes and their property are in Locke's and subsequent liberal theorists' view male heads of households.<sup>11</sup> The "persons" mentioned in the United States Bill of Rights meant to the framers: "only the male heads of families, each of whom was understood to represent the interests of those who constituted his patriarchal entourage" (Okin, 249).

Moreover, Locke presumed a primary qualification for citizenship, the right to participate in public affairs, to be rationality. Only when (male) children had reached a level of adult rationality could they become citizens (VI. 55–63, pp. 425–27). Women were presupposed lacking in rationality, and were excluded from the role of citizens.

Every male is assumed to be sufficiently rational, or "naturally" to have the capacity, to govern a family. . . . In Locke's theory it is women who are seen as "naturally" lacking in rationality and as "naturally" excluded from the status of "free and equal individual," and so unfit to participate in public life (Brennan, 195).

The supposition by male liberal theorists was that the persons who had natural rights were male property owning heads of families. This proposition held in American jurisprudence until well into the twentieth century. Okin asserts, "the male-headed family has been regarded by both legislators and courts as the fundamental basis of U. S. society" (248). One of the reasons an Equal Rights Amendment has been deemed necessary is that the U.S. Supreme Court until recently refused to apply the strictest standards of scrutiny in considering women's right to due process and equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment, seeing by implication that there are aspects to being a female (usually her role within the family) which may properly intrude upon her natural rights as a person.<sup>12</sup>

Feminist theorists in the natural rights tradition sought to argue, however, that women were citizens, were "persons" entitled to the same basic rights as men. Because women were so rooted in the home, however, and subject to male authority therein, it was difficult for even liberal theorists to avoid a critique of the home that had more radical implications than a limited liberal position—that of simply granting women rights—might entail.

The most dramatic early attempt to apply the basic natural rights doctrine to women is the Declaration of Sentiments, drafted primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and issued July 19–20, 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York. It was signed by 100 women and men. This document, rooted in natural rights theory, is modeled nearly word for word on the Declaration of