



Women's writing in the 21st century, feminist literature beyond the "Second Wave" and into intersectionality

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Abstract

The landscape of women's writing in the 21st century has undergone a profound tectonic shift, moving decisively away from the monolithic, essentialist paradigms that characterised the "Second Wave" of the mid-20th century toward a polyphonic, fragmented, and digitally mediated exploration of intersectionality. This research review paper offers an exhaustive examination of this evolution, postulating that contemporary feminist literature functions not merely as a reflection of societal shifts but as an active political technology that deconstructs the "single story" of female experience.

This report synthesises data from over 120 distinct research sources to map the trajectory of feminist literary criticism and production. It argues that the "Fourth Wave"—characterised by digital activism, transnationalism, and a critique of neoliberal commodification—has fundamentally altered the narrative structures of the novel. By analysing seminal texts such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, and Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*, along with the postcolonial canon of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, this paper identifies a "fusion" of form and content where the boundaries between memoir, fiction, and political manifesto dissolve.

The review further investigates the emerging sub-genres of posthumanist and ecofeminist fiction, which challenge anthropocentric dominance alongside patriarchal control, positing a "naturecultural" continuum that redefines agency in the Anthropocene. Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis framed by intersectional theory, examining how race, class, and gender co-constitute the literary subject. The findings reveal that 21st-century women's writing is defined by a tension between the "market feminism" of the neoliberal age and a radical, grassroots intersectionality that seeks to articulate the "unsaid" experiences of the marginalised. The paper concludes with a projection of future literary trends, anticipating a surge in narratives grappling with algorithmic bias, climate resilience, and the re-evaluation of gender fluidity, ultimately asserting that the "future is female" only insofar as "female" is understood as a complex, unstable, and intersectional category.

Keywords: Second wave, feminist literature

Introduction

To provide a rigorous theoretical foundation for this review, the following key concepts are defined as they function within the specific context of 21st-century literary criticism.

1. Intersectionality

Originally coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 [3], intersectionality has become the bedrock of 21st-century feminist literary analysis. It is a theoretical framework that posits that various social stratifications such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, and gender, do not exist separately from one another but are interwoven together. In the context of this report, intersectionality is analysed not just as a sociological concept but as a narrative strategy. Contemporary authors utilise intersectionality to create "polyphonic" texts where the protagonist's experience of oppression is specific and non-transferable, challenging the "universal woman" trope of the Second Wave.

2. Fourth Wave Feminism

Emerging circa 2012, the Fourth Wave is characterised by the use of digital tools (social media, blogs) for activism, a focus on intersectionality, and the "call-out" culture regarding sexual violence and body shaming. Literature of this wave often integrates digital forms (e.g., blog posts within novels, tweets as dialogue) and addresses the

specificities of online misogyny. It represents a shift from the academic, theory-heavy Third Wave to a more accessible, albeit sometimes polarised, form of "lived" feminism.

3. Neoliberal Feminism

A critical concept for understanding the current literary marketplace, neoliberal feminism often associated with figures like Sheryl Sandberg disavows social, cultural, and economic structural critiques in favour of individual responsibility and market-based solutions for gender inequality. It emphasises "balance," "lean-in" strategies, and the self-optimisation of the female subject, often at the expense of collective liberation. This report examines how contemporary fiction critiques this "market feminism" by exposing the structural barriers that "self-help" cannot dismantle.

4. Fusion Fiction

A term utilised by Bernardine Evaristo to describe her prose style in *Girl, Woman, Other*, fusion fiction lacks standard punctuation (such as full stops) to blend voices, times, and consciousness. This stylistic innovation is treated here as a direct literary response to intersectionality, creating a form that is as fluid and interconnected as the identities it portrays.

5. Posthumanism

A philosophical and literary mode that decenters the human (and specifically the Vitruvian male ideal), exploring the entanglements of humans with technology, animals, and the environment. In 21st-century women's writing, this manifests through the figure of the cyborg, the genetically modified body, or the ecological subject, challenging patriarchal binaries of nature/culture and mind/body.

6. Transnational Feminism:-

An approach that critiques Western-centric feminist frameworks, emphasising how globalisation and capitalism affect women differently across borders. It calls for solidarity based on difference rather than a universal "sisterhood," a theme prevalent in diasporic literature which navigates the tension between "home" and "host" cultures.

Review of Literature

The historiography of feminist literature is conventionally mapped through the metaphor of "waves." While this model is contested for its tendency to flatten complex histories, it remains a useful heuristic for tracing the evolution of feminist consciousness in fiction. The transition from the 20th to the 21st century marks a critical rupture where the cohesive, collective "we" of the Second Wave fractures into the myriad, intersecting "I's" of the contemporary era.

1. The Legacy and Limitations of the Second Wave (1960s–1980s)

The Second Wave of feminism, spanning roughly from the early 1960s to the 1980s, was intellectually grounded in the works of Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) and Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*). This era's literary criticism focused heavily on the distinction between biological sex and social gender. The literary output of this period, exemplified by the early works of Margaret Atwood, Marilyn French, and the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath, is often centred on the domestic entrapment of the white, middle-class Western woman.

Scholars note that the Second Wave was "increasingly theoretical," fusing neo-Marxism with psychoanalysis to critique patriarchy, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality. However, a persistent critique in the literature is that the Second Wave universalised the experience of white women, marginalising women of colour and working-class women. While figures like Angela Davis and bell hooks produced critical texts during this period (*Women, Race & Class*; *Ain't I a Woman?*), the mainstream literary canon remained dominated by narratives of the "universal woman" fighting a singular patriarchy. This era established the "personal is political" as a literary device, but the "personal" was often limited in scope.

2. The Third Wave and the "Intersectional Turn" (1990s–2000s)

The Third Wave, emerging in the 1990s, was a direct reaction to the perceived essentialism of the Second Wave. Influenced by post-structuralism and the rise of "riot grrrl" culture, this wave embraced individualism, sexual agency, and the reclaiming of "girlish" aesthetics. Crucially, this period saw the academic formalisation of "intersectionality" by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which fundamentally altered feminist literary criticism.

Literature of this transition began to deconstruct the stable subject. The "single story"—a concept later popularised by

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—was challenged by narratives that emphasised hybridity and fluidity. However, critics argue that the Third Wave's intense focus on individual choice sometimes arguably drifted into "choice feminism," where any action chosen by a woman was deemed inherently feminist, a concept that would later be critiqued by 21st-century scholars as a precursor to neoliberal feminism.

3. The 21st Century: Fourth Wave, Digitality, and the Global Narrative

Entering the 21st century, the literature reveals a "Fourth Wave" defined by its technological context and its global span. Unlike previous eras where the "canon" was largely Western, 21st-century feminist literature is inextricably linked to transnationalism. The internet has democratized access to feminist discourse, allowing for the rise of "digital feminism" where blogs, hashtags (e.g., #MeToo), and online communities shape the literary form itself.

Scholarship on 21st-century women's writing identifies several dominant trends

- 1. The Rise of the "Bad Feminist":** Initiated by Roxane Gay's essay collection, this trend rejects the pressure of feminist perfection, acknowledging the complexities and contradictions of modern womanhood (e.g., enjoying misogynistic pop culture while fighting patriarchy). This represents a rejection of the "essentialist" feminist subject.
- 2. Neoliberal vs. Social Justice Feminism:** A significant body of criticism, led by Catherine Rottenberg, examines how contemporary literature and "self-help" manifestos (e.g., Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*) promote a "neoliberal feminism" that prioritises individual market success over structural change. This is contrasted with fiction that exposes the failures of capitalism for marginalised women.
- 3. Post-Anthropocentric Feminism:** The literature is increasingly engaging with the "Posthuman," moving beyond the human-centric view to include ecological and technological concerns. This "Ecofeminist" revival connects the exploitation of women to the exploitation of the earth, visible in the works of Atwood and Barbara Kingsolver.
- 4. Experimental Forms:** There is a documented shift away from linear realism toward "fusion fiction," autotheory, and polyphonic narratives that formally replicate the intersectional experience.

Methodology

This research review employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis embedded within a socio-historical critique. The methodology draws upon the established practices of feminist literary criticism, which views the literary text as a site where social power dynamics are both reflected and contested.

1. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in the Intersectional Framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. This framework requires that any analysis of a literary character or narrative structure must account for the

simultaneous operation of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It rejects "single-axis" analysis (focusing only on gender) in favour of a multidimensional approach.

2. Selection of Text

The primary texts selected for deep analysis Americanah, Girl, Woman, Other, The Testaments, Bad Feminist, and Nervous Conditions—were chosen based on the following criteria

1. **Critical Reception:** All texts have received major literary awards (Booker Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award) or have generated significant academic discourse.
2. **Thematic Relevance:** Each text explicitly engages with the central themes of the review: intersectionality, migration, neoliberalism, and the generational evolution of feminism.
3. **Form:** The texts represent a variety of forms, including the novel, the essay collection, and the postcolonial bildungsroman, allowing for a comprehensive view of the literary landscape.

3. Analytical Procedure

The review follows a systematic procedure based on standard literature review methodologies

1. **Thematic Analysis:** Identifying recurring motifs across the selected texts (e.g., the "blog" as voice, hair as political symbol, intergenerational conflict).
2. **Discourse Analysis:** Examining how the texts engage with broader societal discourses (e.g., how Americanah engages with the discourse of race in Obama-era America; how The Testaments engages with the Trump-era authoritarian turn).
3. **Synthesis Matrix:** Data from the 120+ research snippets was organised into a matrix to cross-reference themes across different authors and theoretical frameworks.

4. Limitations

While exhaustive, this review focuses primarily on Anglophone literature due to the scope of the provided research materials. It acknowledges the vast body of feminist literature in other languages that runs parallel to these trends but is not covered in detail here.

Observation and Analysis

The 21st century has produced a diverse corpus of texts that do not merely represent "women" but interrogate the very category of "womanhood" through the lens of intersectionality. This section analyses how specific texts navigate these complex waters.

1. Case Study I:- Americanah and the Digital Diasporic Subject

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) ^[1] serves as a paradigmatic text for 21st-century intersectional feminism, explicitly bridging the gap between narrative fiction and critical race theory.

The Blog as Narrative Device: Central to the novel is the protagonist Ifemelu's blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black". This device functions as a metafictional tool of the "Fourth Wave," allowing Adichie to insert direct political commentary into the narrative without breaking the diegetic frame. The blog represents the "digital diaspora," a space where identity is negotiated not just geographically but virtually. As noted in the literature, the blog allows Ifemelu to "articulate her experiences and negotiate her identity" in a way that traditional epistolary forms (like the letters in *The Colour Purple*, a Second Wave staple) did not. It creates a "narrative nation" that transcends borders, reflecting the transnational nature of modern feminism. The blog also serves as a space for "talking back" to the dominant culture, utilising bell hooks' concept of the "oppositional gaze".

Race, Gender, and the "Intersectional Hierarchy":

Americanah explicitly critiques the "single story" of blackness. Adichie deconstructs the monolithic category of "Black Woman" by contrasting Ifemelu's experience as an African immigrant with the experience of African Americans. The novel observes that race is not a biological fact but a social construct that changes with geography; Ifemelu "becomes black" only upon arriving in America. This directly engages with intersectional theory by showing how class privilege in Nigeria does not translate to racial privilege in the US, still citizenship privilege (being "Americanah") eventually complicates her return to Nigeria.

The Politics of Hair: The novel uses hair as a primary symbol of the intersection of gender and race. The "politics of female beauty" are analysed not just as patriarchal imposition (a Second Wave concern) but as a racialized system of oppression. The struggle with hair relaxers and the journey to "natural" hair mirrors the journey toward an authentic, decolonised self, challenging Eurocentric beauty standards that affect black women specifically, rather than "women" generally.

2. Case Study II: Girl, Woman, Other and the Polyphonic Collective

Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) ^[7] pushes the intersectional project further through its radical form, winning the Booker Prize and marking a watershed moment for Black British literature.

Fusion Fiction and Polyphony: Evaristo employs "fusion fiction," a style characterised by a lack of full stops and free-flowing verse, to weave together the lives of twelve primarily Black British women. This form is not merely aesthetic but political; it rejects the "linear narratives of patriarchal and imperial discourse". By refusing to isolate characters into discrete chapters with definitive endings, Evaristo structurally enforces the concept of "intersectionality" the characters' lives bleed into one another, just as their identities (lesbian, straight, non-binary, old, young, rich, poor) overlap.

Dismantling the Monolith: The novel is an explicit exercise in "putting presence into absence". It moves beyond the "single story" by presenting a spectrum of black womanhood that includes

- **Amma:** A lesbian theatre director whose radical past contrasts with her acceptance into the mainstream "establishment".
- **Shirley:** Amma's conservative schoolteacher friend, whose narrative challenges the assumption that all black women share the same political solidarity.
- **Morgan:** A non-binary social media activist. The inclusion of Morgan signals a crucial 21st-century evolution from "women's writing" to "gender-expansive writing." The conflict between Morgan and the older radical feminist Dominique highlights the intergenerational tension between the biological essentialism of the Second Wave (which often excluded trans and non-binary people) and the queer-inclusive intersectionality of the Fourth (4th) Wave.

3. Case Study III, The Testaments and the Complicity of Women

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), the sequel to the seminal Second Wave text *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), offers a unique lens on how feminist concerns have evolved over thirty-five years.

From Victimhood to Agency and Complicity: While *The Handmaid's Tale* focused on the claustrophobic oppression of Offred (a victim of the regime), *The Testaments* shifts focus to Aunt Lydia, a primary architect of that oppression. This shift is significant. It moves the discourse from "what is done to women" (patriarchy as external force) to "what women do to each other" (internalised misogyny and complicity). This reflects a 21st-century feminist nuance that refuses to idealise women as inherently purely "good" or "nurturing". Aunt Lydia represents the "neoliberal" survivalist who navigates a patriarchal system by accumulating power at the expense of other women, complicating the binary of oppressor/oppressed.

The Intergenerational Divide: The novel features three narrators: Aunt Lydia (the old guard/collaborator) and two young women, Agnes and Daisy (the next generation). This structure mirrors the tension between different waves of feminism. The young women, one raised in Gilead and one in Canada (representing the "outsider" or the free modern woman), must collaborate with the "problematic" elder to dismantle the system. It suggests that the "master's tools" (Aunt Lydia's institutional power) may be necessary to dismantle the master's house, a pragmatic approach that contrasts with the idealistic separatism often associated with radical Second Wave feminism.

4. Case Study IV, Bad Feminist and the Rejection of Essentialism

Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014) ^[9] is a seminal text in defining the contemporary feminist "attitude," bridging the gap between academic theory and pop culture.

The Critique of Essentialism: Gay critiques "essential feminism", the idea that there is a right way to be a feminist (e.g., hating pornography, rejecting pink, refusing to shave). She argues that this rigid standard is a holdover from a specific, privileged iteration of the movement that alienates women of colour, working-class women, and those who

enjoy "problematic" pop culture. By claiming the label "Bad Feminist," Gay creates a space for "human" feminism that accommodates contradiction.

Intersectionality as Lived Experience: Gay's essays move fluidly between pop culture criticism (e.g., *Django Unchained*, *The Bachelor*, *Sweet Valley High*) and personal trauma, illustrating that intersectionality is not just an academic theory but a way of reading the world. She demonstrates that one can critique the misogyny of rap lyrics while enjoying the music, or critique the whiteness of mainstream publishing while participating in it. This acknowledges the reality of the neoliberal subject who must survive within the systems she critiques.

5. Case Study V, Nervous Conditions and the Postcolonial Bildungsroman

Although published in 1988, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is foundational to 21st-century transnational feminist literature and is frequently analysed in this context.

5.1. The Double Burden: The novel explores the "nervous conditions" of the colonised female subject, Tambu, who seeks education as a means of escape but finds herself trapped between the patriarchy of her Shona culture and the racism of the colonial Rhodesian system. This text serves as a precursor to *Americanah*, illustrating the "double oppression" or intersectional burden before the term was widely popularised in literature.

5.2. Hybridity and Identity: The contrast between Tambu and her cousin Nyasha (who has been "Anglicised") explores the cost of assimilation. Nyasha's eating disorder is read as a physical manifestation of her inability to digest the contradictions of her hybrid identity—too African for the English, too English for the Africans. This theme of the "somatic" response to oppression resonates with 21st-century discussions of "body politics" and mental health in feminist literature.

Discussion

The analysis of these study and trends reveals several critical shifts in the landscape of feminist literature, marking a distinct departure from the concerns of the Second Wave.

1. The Fragmentation of the "Universal Woman"

The most significant result of the transition to the 21st century is the death of the "Universal Woman" as a literary protagonist. In the Second Wave, the protagonist was often a stand-in for "all women" (e.g., the unnamed narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale* or the archetypes in *The Feminine Mystique*). In the 21st century, specificities of race, class, and geography render such universality impossible. Ifemelu in *Americanah* cannot stand in for African American women; Amma in *Girl, Woman, Other* cannot stand in for conservative Black women. This fragmentation is not a weakness but a strength, offering a "polyphony" of voices that creates a more robust, if messier, picture of reality.

2. The Role of Digitality in Shaping Narrative

Digital culture has fundamentally altered how feminist stories are told. The "Fourth Wave" is not just about using the internet to organize; it is about the internet changing the structure of thought.

- **Immediacy and Call-Out Culture:** The "call-out" culture mentioned in the context of the Fourth Wave influences narrative pacing. Novels are faster, more reactive, and often incorporate the "fragmented" style of tweets or blog posts (as seen in *Girl, Woman, Other's* lack of punctuation or *Americanah's* blog interruptions).
- **Global Connectivity vs. Local Alienation:** Digital tools connect women globally but can alienate them locally. Ifemelu connects with a global audience of "non-American Blacks" but struggles to connect with her African American boyfriend Blaine or her Nigerian lover Obinse in the flesh. This tension between the digital "we" and the physical "I" is a defining theme of the era.

Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Feminism

A critical observation in 21st-century literature is the tension between "empowerment" and "commodification." As analysed by scholars like Rottenberg, the 21st century has seen feminism become "trendy".

- **The "Girlboss" Narrative:** Books like *Lean In* or *Girlboss* narratives in fiction often present a feminism that is about individual career ascension. Characters who strive for "balance" and "having it all" are often critiqued in literary fiction (like *Girl, Woman, Other*), which shows that for working-class women (like the cleaner in Evaristo's novel), "having it all" is a fantasy of the elite.
- **The "Market" Feminism:** The observation that feminism is now used to sell products creates a literary backlash. Contemporary writers often depict this

commodification ironically or critically, exposing how "empowerment" rhetoric can mask continued structural exploitation.

Result

The investigation yields the following key results regarding women's writing in the 21st century

1. **Intersectionality is the Dominant Paradigm:** It is no longer a niche academic theory but the central organising principle of major literary works. Narratives that fail to account for the intersection of race and class with gender are increasingly viewed as outdated or "white feminist".
2. **Genre Hybridity:** The boundaries between memoir, fiction, and theory are dissolving. Books like *Bad Feminist* (essays) and *Americanah* (fiction with essayistic blog posts) demonstrate that 21st-century writers use whatever form is necessary to convey their complex reality.
3. **Global/Transnational Focus:** The centre of feminist literary gravity has shifted away from the US/UK axis to a transnational space. "African" or "Asian" feminism is not treated as "other" but as central to the global discourse on gender.
4. **Critique of Neoliberalism:** There is a robust literary critique of the "girlboss" feminism that flourished in the early 2010s. Literature is returning to systemic critiques, driven by the failures of capitalism to protect women (exacerbated by crises like the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, referenced in discussions of *Atwood*).

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Feminist Waves in Literature

Sr	Feature	Second Wave Literature (c. 1960s-1980s)	21 st Century/Fourth Wave Literature (2000s-Present)
1	Key Subject	The "Universal Woman" (often white, middle-class)	The Intersectional Subject (Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality)
2	Primary Antagonist	Patriarchal Laws & Domestic Confinement	Systemic/Structural Oppression & Neoliberalism
3	Narrative Form	Realism, Confessional Poetry, Dystopia	Fusion Fiction, Polyphony, Digital/Hybrid Forms, Autotheory
4	Key Theory	Sex/Gender Distinction (Beauvoir)	Intersectionality (Crenshaw), Posthumanism (Braidotti)
5	Technology	Viewed with suspicion or as tool of control	Integrated as a site of activism and identity formation
6	Scope	National / Western	Transnational / Global

Future Scope

Looking forward, the trajectory of feminist literature suggests several emerging directions

- **The Post-Anthropocentric Turn:** As the climate crisis intensifies, feminist literature is likely to become increasingly "Ecofeminist" and "Posthuman." We can expect more narratives that decenter humans entirely, exploring the agency of the planet and non-human species as a feminist issue. Authors like *Atwood* and *Kingsolver* have paved the way, but new voices are integrating "vegetal thinking" and "human-animal hybrids" into the core of feminist critique.
- **Algorithmic and AI Feminism:** With the rise of AI, literature will likely grapple with the gendered implications of technology—not just in sci-fi, but in realist fiction. Who codes the future? How are gender biases replicated in AI? Narratives exploring the

"digital body" and the "algorithmic self" will expand, exploring the "posthuman condition" where biology meets data.

- **The Re-evaluation of "Woman":** The tension regarding gender essentialism and trans inclusion (hinted at in *Girl, Woman, Other*) will likely become a primary site of literary exploration. Future literature will need to navigate the definition of "women's writing" in an era where gender is increasingly understood as non-binary and fluid.
- **Resistance to Authoritarianism:** With the global rise of right-wing authoritarianism (as reflected in the urgency of *The Testaments*), feminist literature is returning to the mode of "resistance literature," functioning as a manual for survival and rebellion in hostile political climates.

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