



Received: 10-12-2025
Accepted: 20-01-2026

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Across Letters and Screens: Feminist Friendship from Radical Hope to Postfeminist Uncertainty in Gillian E. Hanscombe's *between Friends* and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*

¹ Dr. A Arun Daves, ² Dr. S Bharathi

^{1,2} Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2026.6.1.5716>

Corresponding Author: Dr. A Arun Daves

Abstract

Feminist friendship has long functioned as both a personal bond and a political strategy, shaping how women imagine solidarity, resistance, and emotional survival across historical moments. This paper offers a comparative reading of Gillian E. Hanscombe's *Between Friends* (1982) ^[1] and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) ^[2] to trace the transformation of feminist sensibilities from second-wave radical optimism to postfeminist and fourth-wave ambivalence. Hanscombe's epistolary novel reflects a period marked by collective activism, ideological debate, and faith in structural change, where friendship operates as a deliberate feminist practice grounded in dialogue and consciousness-raising. Rooney's contemporary narrative, by

contrast, presents friendship within a neoliberal and digitally mediated context, characterized by emotional restraint, economic precarity, and fragmented communication. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores how differing modes of communication—letters versus digital messages—shape political imagination and intimacy. While the novels differ in tone and historical outlook, both insist on the enduring importance of friendship as a site where the personal and political intersect. Ultimately, the study argues that feminist hope has not vanished but has shifted in form, moving from utopian collective visions to quieter, fragile negotiations of care and connection in an uncertain world.

Keywords: Second-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, Gillian E. Hanscombe, Sally Rooney, Friendship, Hope, Communication, Neoliberalism

Introduction

Friendship has always occupied a complex place within feminist thinking. It is at once intimate and political, personal and ideological, shaped by historical conditions yet deeply rooted in emotional life. Feminist movements have repeatedly turned to friendship as a model for solidarity, resistance, and alternative forms of community, particularly in moments when traditional social structures appeared inadequate or hostile. Literary representations of friendship thus provide a revealing lens through which shifts in feminist sensibility may be traced. Gillian E. Hanscombe's *Between Friends* (1982) ^[1] and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) ^[2], though separated by nearly four decades, offer a compelling dialogue about how feminist friendship evolves across time. Together, these novels chart a movement from the utopian confidence of second-wave feminism to the ambivalent, restrained emotional landscape of postfeminist and fourth-wave contexts shaped by neoliberalism and digital communication.

Hanscombe's *Between Friends* emerges from the height of second-wave feminist activism, a period characterized by collective struggle, radical imagination, and the conviction that social structures could be fundamentally transformed. Feminism in this moment was not merely an identity but a political practice grounded in shared discussion, debate, and consciousness-raising. The novel's epistolary form is crucial to its political vision. Letters exchanged among four women—Meg, Jane, Amy, and Frances—become a medium through which feminist theory is tested, contested, and lived. These letters do not function as passive narration; rather, they enact a feminist method of knowledge production rooted in dialogue and mutual engagement. Writing, in this context, is inseparable from activism.

Each of the women represents a distinct feminist position circulating within second-wave debates. Jane articulates a separatist vision, arguing that meaningful liberation requires women to withdraw from male-dominated institutions altogether. Amy

occupies a more reformist position, believing that feminism can reshape existing social structures without dismantling them entirely. Meg, the novel's emotional and ideological center, navigates between radical commitments and lived realities, particularly her role as a mother. Frances, skeptical of radical feminism, insists that equality has largely been achieved and that continued activism is unnecessary. Through these contrasting perspectives, Hanscombe transforms abstract feminist theory into personal struggle, revealing how ideological commitments shape everyday relationships.

The strength of *Between Friends* lies in its refusal to smooth over feminist disagreement. Instead, the novel foregrounds conflict as an inevitable—and even productive—feature of collective struggle. The women's friendships are tested by ideological divergence, emotional vulnerability, and ethical failure. This tension culminates in the novel's most devastating moment: Meg's rape by Frances's male partner. Frances's response—marked by denial, silence, and an insistence on separating the “personal” from the “political”—exposes the limits of liberal feminist thinking. Her refusal to acknowledge structural violence reveals how individualism can undermine solidarity. Hanscombe makes clear that political neutrality is itself a political stance, one that often reproduces existing power relations.

Despite these fractures, *Between Friends* remains animated by hope. Even when feminist ideals appear strained or compromised, the characters continue to write to one another. The act of letter-writing becomes a declaration of faith in communication as a means of repair and transformation. The novel ultimately gestures toward a tentative reconciliation, suggesting that feminist commitment requires flexibility rather than rigid adherence to doctrine. In this sense, Hanscombe's work reflects the optimism of its historical moment: a belief that sustained dialogue could generate new forms of community and social life.

Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* presents a strikingly different feminist landscape. Written in the context of postfeminism and fourth-wave discourse, the novel reflects a generation shaped less by collective activism than by economic precarity, emotional self-monitoring, and digital mediation. Rooney's characters are politically aware but emotionally cautious, fluent in critique yet hesitant to commit themselves fully to ideological positions. Friendship, in this world, is no longer an explicit site of feminist organizing but a fragile space negotiated amid competing demands of intimacy, ambition, and survival.

The novel follows Frances, a young poet navigating relationships with her best friend and former lover Bobbi, as well as an older married couple, Melissa and Nick. Unlike Hanscombe's characters, Rooney's figures rarely articulate feminist beliefs explicitly. Feminism is present as an assumed background rather than a declared position. This silence reflects a postfeminist sensibility in which feminist gains are taken for granted, even as structural inequalities persist. Frances embodies this contradiction: she critiques capitalism, gender norms, and power dynamics with sharp intelligence, yet she remains emotionally withdrawn and deeply uncertain of her own worth.

Communication in Rooney's novel is notably fragmented. Text messages, emails, and brief conversations replace the sustained exchanges of Hanscombe's letters. This shift in

form reflects broader cultural changes in how intimacy is negotiated. Frances's messages are often delayed, ironic, or evasive, functioning less as bridges between people than as protective barriers. Language, rather than facilitating connection, becomes a means of managing vulnerability. The result is a persistent sense of emotional distance, even within ostensibly close relationships.

Economic precarity plays a crucial role in shaping these dynamics. Frances's financial instability repeatedly intrudes upon her friendships, turning personal choices into survival strategies. Her decision to publish a story inspired by Bobbi, despite the risk of betrayal, is driven by necessity rather than ambition. Similarly, her romantic involvement with Nick is entangled with power imbalances shaped by age, class, and emotional dependence. Rooney thus exposes how neoliberal conditions erode the foundations of solidarity, transforming relationships into sites of negotiation rather than mutual support.

Illness further intensifies Frances's isolation. Her experience with endometriosis is marked by secrecy and self-blame, reflecting a cultural logic that treats vulnerability as failure. Unlike Hanscombe's characters, who externalize oppression and seek collective solutions, Frances internalizes suffering, interpreting it as a personal inadequacy. This inward turn exemplifies the postfeminist emphasis on self-management, where structural problems are reframed as individual shortcomings.

Yet *Conversations with Friends* is not devoid of hope. While it lacks the revolutionary fervor of *Between Friends*, it gestures toward quieter forms of resistance. Frances's evolving relationship with Bobbi suggests that intimacy remains possible, even under conditions that discourage openness. The novel's conclusion does not offer resolution or redemption, but it allows for the possibility of care, vulnerability, and ethical reckoning. In this restrained hope, Rooney captures the emotional texture of a generation skeptical of grand narratives yet unwilling to abandon connection altogether.

Reading Hanscombe and Rooney together illuminates how feminist friendship adapts to changing historical circumstances. In *Between Friends*, friendship is explicitly politicized, serving as a foundation for collective action and ideological debate. In *Conversations with Friends*, friendship is more tentative, shaped by irony, economic pressure, and emotional caution. Yet in both texts, friendship remains central to the negotiation of identity and meaning. What changes is not its importance, but its form.

The contrast between letters and digital messages is particularly revealing. Hanscombe's epistolary structure reflects a belief in sustained dialogue as a pathway to transformation. Writing takes time, demands reflection, and assumes that ideas can evolve through engagement. Rooney's fragmented communication reflects a world in which attention is divided and vulnerability feels risky. These formal differences underscore how modes of communication shape political imagination. Where second-wave feminism emphasized collective articulation, postfeminism often fragments expression into isolated moments.

At the same time, both novels insist that the personal and the political remain inseparable. Hanscombe dramatizes this through overt ideological conflict, while Rooney reveals it through emotional and economic entanglement. In both cases, friendship becomes the space where broader social

forces are most acutely felt. Whether through feminist separatism or neoliberal individualism, the pressures of history are inscribed in intimate relationships.

Ultimately, these novels suggest that feminist hope has not disappeared, but it has changed its shape. Hanscombe's vision is expansive and utopian, rooted in the belief that collective effort can remake society. Rooney's vision is narrower, focused on survival, care, and ethical awareness within constrained circumstances. Both perspectives are historically grounded, reflecting the possibilities and limitations of their respective moments.

By placing *Between Friends* and *Conversations with Friends* in dialogue, we gain a deeper understanding of feminism not as a linear progression but as an evolving conversation. Friendship, in these texts, serves as both mirror and measure of feminist possibility. It reveals what can be imagined, what must be endured, and what remains worth striving for. Across letters and screens, across decades of change, feminist literature continues to return to friendship as a site where hope—however fragile—can still take root.

References

1. Hanscombe Gillian E. *Between Friends*. The Women's Press, 1982.
2. Rooney Sally. *Conversations with Friends*. Faber & Faber, 2017.
3. Carregal-Romero José. Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 2023; 64(2):213-220.
4. Creed Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
5. Evans Judith. *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second-Wave Feminism*. SAGE Publications, 1995.
6. Gill Rosalind. Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2007; 10(2):147-166.
7. Jolly Margaretta. *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism*. Columbia University Press, 2008.
8. Žižek Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 1989.