

FEMINIST CRITICISM: AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Feminist criticism began as a kind of revolution against the traditional literary criticism which was male-centred that considered women's writing as inferior. A feeling prevailed among the traditional literary critics that women were incapable of any abstract thought and theorizing. The feminist critics were aware of the fact that criticism till then had been male dominated and the critical attention concentrated mostly on male writers. Feminist criticism aims at reviewing and revising the concepts which were earlier considered universal but which actually originate in particular cultures and serve particular goals. It wishes to redefine our concept of human nature and reality and thereby challenge the traditional concerns of literary criticism including established canons and ways of reading.

Key Words: Feminist Criticism, Gynocriticism, Male-centred, Femininity.

Feminist Criticism in our times has come to occupy a highly significant place in the field of theories concerned with interpretation and analysis of texts and hence it becomes a concern of every scholar interested in different critical approaches to literature to be aware of its nature, historical background, dimensions and potentialities. Yet a good deal of confusion exists among the scholars as to what exactly is meant by feminist criticism. There has been a good deal of debate on each of these issues and the conflicting, contradicting views among the feminist critics prevail. It is for this reason that Elaine Showalter remarks, "It is very difficult to propose theoretical coherence in the interpretation which by its nature is so wide-ranging, although as a critical practice feminist reading has certainly been very influential" (Showalter 182). In this regard Toril Moi expresses her view when she says, "Knowledge is ever uniformed by theoretical assumptions" (Moi 77). Feminist criticism began as a part of the general movement of women's liberation. The English and the American women writers and critics revolted against the fact that women writers had been silenced by and large excluded from literary history.

Thus feminist criticism began as a kind of revolution against the traditional literary criticism which was male-centred that considered women's writing as inferior. A feeling prevailed among the traditional literary critics that women were incapable of any abstract thought and theorizing. The feminist critics were aware of the fact that criticism till then had been male dominated and the critical attention concentrated mostly on male writers. Women writers

were almost excluded from this terrain simply because they were women who always faced social and economic obstacles to their literary ambitions. This new generation of feminist critics challenged the traditional theories of literary critics and described these as inaccurate and insulting and they tried to expose literary tradition as a construct. Women writers encountered resistance because literary creativity has seemed to rival biological creativity in the most direct way. It was believed that immense and exhausting obligations were conferred on women by maternity and hence a mother could have neither time nor the creative energy so as to enable her to compete with male writers who could devote their lives to their profession. In this way the artistic capability of women was always doubted in spite of the fact that there have been women in the ranks of literary genius.

Criticism written by women was not taken seriously and was considered 'superficial' as they were supposed to be innately handicapped in literary competition with men. But it does not mean that no woman is capable of writing literary criticism worth the name as there is a list of women who gave substantial and valuable contribution to literary criticism. They include George Eliot, Simone de Beauvoir, Winifred Holtby, Kate Millet, Adrienne Rich, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Mary Wollstonecraft and George Sand etc. Feminist criticism aims at reviewing and revising the concepts which were earlier considered universal but which actually originate in particular cultures and serve particular goals. It wishes to redefine our concept of human nature and reality and thereby challenge the traditional concerns of literary criticism including established canons and ways of reading. This enquiry holds two related premises about gender; one is that inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor the divine mandate, but a cultural construct and therefore a proper subject of study for any humanistic discipline. The second is that a male perspective, assumed to be universal, has dominated fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods. Cheri Register proclaims:

Many feminists make it clear that they are not simply seeking more room for women in the present social order. They want a new social order founded on humanistic values. Some of which are traditionally female and not respected in contemporary society. Those traditionally 'male' values that feminists believe harmful to the common good - excessive competition, for example, would be de-emphasized. Therefore, a female literary personage with 'masculine' characteristics does not necessarily meet with feminist approval.
(Register 45)

Virginia Woolf, Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter reveal the affinity which women writers have felt for each other, the interest - sometimes encouraging, sometimes anxiously competitive - that they have taken in each other's work. The way the writing of one might prepare the ground for another, the problems all faced, and still face, in handling the institutions of literary production. The expansion of feminist literary criticism and, particularly in America, of courses about women's writing, and their establishment of

feminist publishing houses or feminist lists within existing houses introduced to readers an extensive new area of work. Several founding texts in feminist literary criticism were produced in America in the late 1960s and throughout 1970s. For example, Mary Ellmann wrote *Thinking About Women* in 1968, Patricia Meyer Spacks wrote *The Female Imagination*, Ellen Moers wrote *Literary Women* in 1976 and Elaine Showalter wrote *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* in 1977.

Feminist criticism is, indeed a critique of the sex-gender system. While sex is biological given, gender is a social construct, constructed so as to satisfy the male flair for domination. As John Stuart Mill observes the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an 'equal'. The construction of gender signifies men's attempt to secure control over biological reproduction. Here lies an explanation for the construction of femininity in patriarchy with its twin images of women as, on the one hand the sexual property of men, and on the other, the chaste mothers of their children. Male and female are biological categories, masculinity and femininity are social definitions. Michele Barrett argues that so far as gender is concerned "it is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning as not simply 'difference' but as division oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women" (Barrett 29). Feminist criticism is a protest against the fact that women are considered inferior and they are devalued as 'the second sex'. But a question arises and a very vital one for that matter i.e. Why concentrate on the generation of ideas and theories in literary form when we should be addressing the more immediate social forms that sexual discrimination takes? Why not concentrate on the expression of male power in medicine, legal relations or sexuality rather than literature?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that literary criticism has made tremendous contribution to the evolution of feminist thought and hence to feminist action. It was not for nothing that Kate Millet chose to attack patriarchy with the help of literary criticism. Sexual Politics, as Alison Light argues was 'the starting point from which to move towards a feminist literary criticism. The growth of the feminist movement itself is inseparable from feminist criticism. Women become feminists by becoming conscious of, and criticizing, the power of symbols and the ideology of culture. Moreover, the feminists in order to appropriate the land and the weapons, will have to make literary criticism an integral part of the feminist struggle. Feminist criticism is, thus, closely related with feminism at large which aims at liberating women from the structures that have marginalized them. Since feminist criticism originated in women's liberation movement, it values literature that is of some use to the movement. As Elaine Showalter observes:

It is important to see the female literary tradition in broad terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self-awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society because we cannot show a pattern of deliberate progress and accumulation. (Showalter 12)

Just like feminism in general, the aim here is not only to reinterpret but to change the world. The traditional social paradigms and the alternatives to it are the dual concerns of feminist historians and literary critics. Traditional history is a record of male experience written by men from a male perspective and it is a record of battles and politics and not of child bearing. So the women are out of focus in traditional history and the historians of women, therefore are trying to reconstruct the female experience.

Since the rise of feminism it has often been suggested that women has been forcibly kept away from the peaks of creativeness in the arts and sciences only by cultural and social restrictions. It has been observed that even the best writers since the emancipation are still not given due recognition just because they are females. This is intolerable to the feminist writers and it is for this reason that Helen Cixous asserts in as feminists are anarchic and the feminist texts pulsate with a rhetoric of rebellion and rupture. In this way, feminism is an attack on patriarchy - the hierarchical institutionalization of the unequal roles and a status given to two biological genders - the birthright priority where males rule females which is an attack on sexual discrimination and the exclusion of women from all the significant fields. Patriarchy maintains its strong hold by keeping women down and that is why the feminists aim at putting an end to male domination. To achieve this goal, they will have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, its art, its laws, its nuclear families based on father-right and nation-states, all of the images, institutions, customs and habits which define women as worthless and invisible victims. Yet an impatience with patriarchal uses of criticism will not re-address the devaluation of women critics by men. Feminist criticism must redefine literary theory as the programmatic understanding of women's experience in literary form to violate the taboo on participation in theoretical exposition that is set up for women form adolescence. Maggie Humm rightly observes:

An even more important task for feminist criticism, then - more important than re-evaluating women's intellect is to re-evaluate the whole terrain of criticism itself as mapped out and colonised by men; that is, to change the language of of literary criticism from one of power and possession to one of emotion and caring. (Humm 83)

Feminists try to challenge and de-construct male dominated ways of seeing. It is for this reason Raman Selden observes that "feminist criticism sometimes summons up the anger of the furies to disturb the complacent certainties of patriarchal culture and to create a less oppressive climate for women writers and readers" (Selden 128).

The suppression of women does not remain confined to the family structure only. Critics like Dale Spender believe that women have been oppressed by a male-dominated language, and hence it makes sense for the women writers to contest men's control of languages rather than merely to retreat into a ghetto of feminist discourse. The focus of women writers and the

study of representation of differences in women's writings is termed as 'gynocriticism' by Showalter which is explained by her as the history of styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or the collective female career and the evolution and laws of a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and develops new models based on the study of female experience. The gynocritics thus, reject the male models and theories of literary criticism and wish to construct a female framework to analyse women's literature because they feel that the male models and theories have no place on feminist literary criticism. Showalter believes that an adequate feminist theory can arise only from within women's experience or from their unconsciousness; women must produce their own language and their own universe which may not appear rational to men. The gynocritics believe that women do not perceive human realities the way men do. A woman's experience includes a different perceptual and emotional life. Elaine Showalter contends:

For readily discernible historical reasons women have characteristically concerned themselves with matters more or less peripheral to male concerns or at least slightly skewed from them. The difference between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones make a difference in female writing. (Showalter 142)

Ros Coward argues that a book written by a woman need not necessarily be a feminist text just for having been written by a woman. Michele Barrett is also of the opinion that the focus on female experience is not the only condition for making the work feminist. It means that even the text written by men can claim to be the 'feminist' texts.

Feminist criticism is socio-linguistic in nature because it places woman at the centre and tries to describe women's writing with a practical attention to the physical use of words. There is a marked difference in a masculine and a feminist discourse as Maggie Humm remarks:

Women think in circles rather than lines, we tend to be holistic rather than partial, we prefer open to closed systems; we employ associational rather than sequential logic; we are oppressed with detail and with pattern; that we write sentences to quote Virginia Woolf's of a more elastic fiber than the old, that we are subjective and naturally attracted to interior spaces, children and animals. (Humm14)

Feminist criticism is confronted with three main problems. First is the problem of themes and of literary texts and this criticism has its focus on the oppression of women as a dominant theme in literature. For this purpose, it re-examines the male texts and tries to show the way women in them are frequently moulded within tight cultural and social constraints. The second problem for the feminist literary criticism is the problem of creating a gendered reader by offering her new methods and a fresh critical practice. The third problem for feminist criticism is the problem of making women act as women reader.

All feminists critics share three basic assumptions - the first is that since writing manipulates gender for symbolic purposes, all literature as well as literary criticism is bound to be ideological. It is believed that the ideology of women critics includes many more contradictions than the ideology of men. The second major assumption of feminist criticism is that 'there are sex-related strategies' of writing and the third assumption is that the 'continuing tradition of literary culture, like the economic and social traditions of which it is a part, uses male norms to exclude or undervalue female writing and scholarship. Maggie Humm feels that even the contemporary criticism betrays an exclusively male frame of reference which only restricts women's writing and criticism but also creates categories which are as inaccurate and distorted as those that Virginia Woolf discovered.

To sum up, we can say that feminist critics challenge the traditional generic classifications based on texts about men being applied to women's modes. They challenge the terms which give preference to the male view of world literature. It is important to mention here that there is certainly a link between history, sociology, psychology, anthropology and the feminist criticism. For example, Showalter presents her viewpoint on this issue in her *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. She writes:

Gynocriticism is related to feminist research in history, anthropology and sociology, all of which have developed hypothesis of a female sub culture including not only the ascribed status and the internalised constructs of femininity, but also the occupation, interactions and consciousness of women. (Showalter 90)

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