



REVISITING ELAINE SHOWALTER'S 'FEMINIST CRITICISM IN THE WILDERNESS': A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Elaine Showalter's 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', published in 1981, is a seminal essay in the field of Feminist Literary Criticism. It addresses the complexities and challenges of feminist criticism, proposing a more structured approach for understanding and evaluating women's literature. In this essay, Showalter deplores the plight of women writers and feminist criticism in the contemporary patriarchal literary culture. She remarks that feminist criticism is in the wilderness. It is in the quagmire of confusion and neglect. Feminist literary sensibility is groping in the dark. She also says that feminists are most isolated and the least understood.

Keywords: *Feminist literary theory and criticism, Four Models, Gyno Criticism, Inclusivity.*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary theory and criticism focus on the depiction of females in literature. Feminist critics concentrate on the changing position of women in society and yearn to free females from oppressive restraints. Definitions of what is a woman, the role of culture in constructing identity and human nature are in the centre of these restraints. Feminist criticism is a part of the worldwide movements for equal opportunities and empowerment of women. This is a result of age-old struggles for equal rights for women. Women's struggles for equality are marked by books such as *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill and *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) by Margaret Fuller. The complaint lodged by females is that literary criticism since

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the days of Aristotle has consistently excluded their achievements. By way of redressing the balance, feminist criticism seeks to challenge traditional notions and establish the perspectives and experiences of women which had been marginalized for ages and ages. Feminist literary criticism focuses on the political and social issues associated with women's actual participation in culture. As M. A. R. Habib, in *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present*, points out:

For most of this long history women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to struggle against a male ideology . . . the depiction of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures – was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender. It was only with women's struggle in the twentieth century for political rights that feminist criticism arose in any systematic way. Since the early twentieth century feminist criticism has grown to encompass a vast series of concerns: a rewriting of literary history so as to include the contribution of women; the tracing of a female literary tradition; theories of sexuality and sexual difference, drawing on psychoanalysis. (667)

Elaine Showalter's essay was written during a time when feminist literary criticism was gaining momentum but lacked a cohesive theoretical framework. Showalter aimed to articulate a distinct and organized methodology for feminist criticism, arguing that it should be recognized as a legitimate and independent field of study within literary criticism. In her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1970) Showalter analysis the mechanism through which the women writers were kept out of the literary canon during the 19th century. The criticism of the time was almost entirely patriarchal in its opinions. It rejected women's texts as limited in range superfluous and trivial. They were limited to certain themes why the prevalent male critical opinion which stated "The women's novel deal with domestic problems, children, clothing, fashion and food." (Wilderness 329) Showalter distinguishes between two major forms of feminist criticism Feminist Critique and Gyno criticism. Feminist Critique approach focuses on analysing the portrayal and representation of women in male-authored texts. It often critiques the patriarchal biases and stereotypes in literature. But Gyno criticism is Showalter's proposed approach, and it centres on the study of women as writers and producers of literature. It involves the exploration of women's literary history, themes, genres, and the development of a female literary tradition.

Feminist literary critics have primarily raised questions about the stereotypical representation of women in fiction and the minor roles provided to female characters. A number of feminist critics have concentrated on Gyno criticism, a term given by Elaine Showalter. Gyno criticism concentrates on the female framework for analysing works written by women, including journals and letters. The focus of Gynocritics is specifically on



feminine subject matters in literature written by women authors for exploring the domestic world, the experience of giving birth, woman-woman and mother-daughter relations. Showalter coined the term "Gyno Criticism" in 1979 published essay "Towards a Feminist Poetic". Gynocritics explore new possibilities and dimensions in feminist criticism. Their critical creed has significantly shifted in the post-war stage from women as readers to women as writers. They have shifted their centre from the revisionary reading to the investigation of literature written by women. No English term existed for such specialized critics and hence Showalter invented the term Gyno criticism. Gynocritics have revised the previous texts for the representation of women. Gynocritics believe that a large has to be said and revealed by women, but they are not able to say by adopting the androcentric governed discourses. They have turned their focus on to the imaginative literature and are striving to see how far it has misrepresented women throughout the ages or contributed to impose fixed gendered roles on them. They are dissatisfied with the wider social and critical situation. Showalter points out:

Gynocritics offer many theoretical opportunities. To see women's writing as our primary subject forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of the theoretical problem before us. It is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference.
(Wilderness 329-330)

Showalter identifies four theoretical models to understand the difference in women's writing. Biological model looks at the ways in which the female body and experience influence women's writing. Wilfred L. Guerin in his book *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* remarks:

Showalter's biological model is the most problematic: if the text can be said in some way to mirror the body, then does that reduce women writers merely to bodies? Yet Showalter praises the often-shocking frankness of women writers who relate the intimacies of the female experience of the female body. (Guérin 225)

Linguistic model examines the ways language and expression in women's writing may differ from men's, considering whether women use language differently. Psychoanalytic model analyses how female writers' experiences with their identities and sexuality shape their writing. Cultural model explores how cultural factors, such as social class, race, and sexuality, influence women's literature. Showalter advocates for a pluralistic approach to feminist criticism that recognizes the diversity of women's experiences and expressions. She emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and the need to consider the intersectionality of gender with other social categories. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter discusses that feminist critics want to know if the sex difference can be located



from the language. She also questions about writing, reading, and speaking, which is gender biased. Female poets and writers have started attacking the normal language, which is male dominated and terms it as the oppressor's language. Feminist critics try to find and use an appropriate language for females as language is the place from where we must proceed or begin. They contrive for a language which is not oppressive and doesn't leave women speechless but instead comforts the user. Showalter observes:

The appropriate task for feminist criticism, I believe is to concentrate on women's access to language, on the available lexical range from which words can be selected on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence.

(Wilderness 336)

Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that females' otherness seems to be absolute because unlike the subordination of other oppressed groups such as Jews and black Americans, women's subordination was not the result of a social change or historical event but is partly rooted in her anatomy and physiology. Women have never formed a minority, and they have never achieved cohesion as a group, since they have always lived dispersed among males, "As bourgeois women, they are in solidarity with bourgeois men and not with women proletarians; as white women, they are in solidarity with white men and not with black women" (Simone 9). She further argues that "The division of sexes is a biological given, not moment in history" (9). She argues that women's situation will be improved primarily by a change in her economic condition, but this change must also generate moral, social, psychological and cultural transformations. She is confident that women will arrive at "One must certainly not think that modifying her economic situation is enough to transform woman: this factor has been and remains the primordial factor of her development, but until it brings about the moral, social and cultural consequences it heralds and requires the new women cannot appear" (777). Both man and woman will exist for self and recognize each other as subject. She advises that women can improve their status and conditions by paying attention to their subordinate status and by believing in their strength.

Showalter comments "to their contemporaries 19th century women writers were women first artist second." Showalter lists certain problems which confront women's scholars. First, there is the problem of the woman scholar trying to position herself in the academy which is patriarchal in the assumptions which it makes and in the structures through which it deals. Woman researcher seems only a caricature to such an academy. Next, there is the problem of finding the way in which a woman scholar should create space for herself. Patriarchy depends



on the notion that what women do is trivial and irrelevant. Finally, there is the isolation that proves how difficult it is for feminist theories to relate to any critical school.

Elaine analyses that women constitute the mutual culture and men the dominant culture. Feminist criticism has no theory to support it. Another hurdle in the progress of feminist criticism is that feminist critics are reluctant to define their aims, objectives and honest endeavours. There is massive silence about Third World women writers. But Elaine Showalter strikes an optimistic note and says that this dialogue in reality is in an evolutionary phase. She stresses that the need for a feminist criticism that is genuinely women centred, independent and intellectually coherent. Her essay highlights the need for feminist theories to work out of framework which they can share. Showalter suggests Gynocritic theories which are centred on the experiences of women as writer as a common factor.

Elaine Showalter has acquired fame as one of the most pioneering feminist critics who propounded the theoretical premises of Gyno criticism and the Female Aesthetics. Elaine Showalter's 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' was first published in Critical Inquiry in 1981. Here she presents a comprehensive overview of the emergence and evolution of Feminist Criticism in the midst of male dominated theories of criticism. She delineates the ideological significance of a feminist criticism while dwelling on the significance of women's stance as writers, readers or critics. She goes on to deliberate upon the sphere of women's writing as an exclusively women centred discourse, being a part of what she calls the Female Aesthetic. A major part of the essay comprises a detailed and illustrated description of the four models of differentiation which characterise women's writing and set these apart from the male writing.

Showalter describes that Feminist Criticism is in wilderness. To be in the wilderness means to be away from the position of power and importance, to be irrelevant and to be in confusion and the neglect. Showalter thinks that the spirit of Female Aesthetics and Female Consciousness are feeling desolate, defrauded and deserted. She suggests that feminist criticism is passing through confusion.

In the essay 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' Elaine remarks that there are two modes of feminist criticism. The first mode is concerned with the feminist as a reader. It offers and facilitates feminist reading of the works of art. It studies the literary works as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how language has both trapped and liberated us. This is very bracing and stimulating contact with literature. Show water terms it as families to reading or feminist technique.

Some critics have compared the two poles of feminist criticism with the Old Testament and the New Testament. The former looks for the errors and sins of the past and the latter for the grace of the imagination. So, feminist criticism is groping in the darkness. It seems to wander



in the wilderness. Feminist criticism has no theory to support it. Showalter says that all feminist criticism is to a certain extent revisionist. It finds fault with the prevailing conceptual structures and considers these inadequate. It tries to modify and revise them. But the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing revising, harmonizing or even attacking male critical theory keeps feminists dependent. Their progress is retarded in solving their own theoretical problems. So, the need is for a feminist criticism that is a genuinely women centred, independent and intellectually coherent. They have to find answers to the questions that come from their experience. Feminist Criticism has to learn from women's studies and from international feminists.

In the first section of the essay entitled "Pluralism and the Feminist Critique" Showalter presents an analogical description of the two modes of feminist criticism i.e. critical interpretation and literary activity in relation to the corrective and the imaginary aspects of feminist criticism and women's literature. She finds that feminist criticism is not unified anymore. But at the same time, it is much more adventurous today in assimilating and engaging with theory.

In the second half of the essay entitled "Defining the Feminine - Gynocritics and the Woman's Text", Showalter draws our attention to the opinions of Virginia Woolf and Helen Cixous. These critics stress the need to define a female practice of writing in the content of what we mean by the feminine. The focus has shifted to a sustained investigation of literature by women. Thus, the second mode is the study of woman as writer. Its subjects are the history, psychodynamics of female creativity, the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. Showalter uses the term Gynocritics for this critical discourse. Gynocritics offer many theoretical opportunities. Seeing women's writing as their primary subject, Showalter considers the question of difference of women writing, which makes them a distinct literary group. She asserts that womanhood itself has shaped women's creative expression. Elaine Showalter's concern about carving a distinct and rightful identity of the women writer is also revealed in the essay. Showalter observes that the process of defining the feminine has already begun.

Showalter's differentiation between Feminist Critique and Gynocriticism provides a clear framework for feminist literary criticism. This distinction allows for a more focused and organized study of women's literature. By advocating for pluralism, Showalter highlights the need for inclusivity in feminist criticism, acknowledging the varied experiences of women across different cultures and social backgrounds. The four models of difference offer a comprehensive approach to understanding women's writing, integrating biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural perspectives. Some critics argue that Showalter's biological model risks essentialism by implying that there are inherent, unchangeable differences between male and female writing based on biology. While Showalter emphasizes the



importance of gender, some critics believe that her focus on gender differences may overshadow other important aspects of literary analysis, such as class, race, and historical context. While Gyno criticism aims to establish a female literary tradition, it may inadvertently isolate women's writing from broader literary movements and discourses, potentially limiting its influence and relevance.

Showalter's contribution to the cause of feminist writing and feminist criticism is immense and great. Her crusading zeal for the cause of women writers and women critics has infused a new life into the forlorn feminine psyche. Her own endeavours in the realm of feminist criticism have brought *The Mad Woman in the Attic* into the main stream of literary culture. Her concept of Gynocritics, Female Aesthetic and her clarion call for feminist theories to work out a common framework are substantial contribution to feminist criticism and to feminist writing. She is one of the most influential feminist scholars and highly recognised critic known for her stimulating and strongly held opinions. She not only treasures feminism in her own life what also shares it with others.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that Showalter is one of the most renowned and eminent scholars in the realm of feminist criticism. She has acquired fame as one of the most pioneering feminist critics who propounded the theoretical premise of Gynocriticism. Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" is a foundational text that significantly contributed to the development of feminist literary criticism. Her distinctions between feminist critique and Gyno criticism, along with the four models of difference, provide valuable tools for analyzing women's literature. Despite some criticisms, her work remains influential in promoting a more inclusive and structured approach to feminist criticism. Showalter's emphasis on the diversity and complexity of women's writing continues to resonate in contemporary feminist literary studies.

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