

ELAINE SHOWALTER'S *FEMINIST CRITICISM IN THE WILDERNESS*: A CRITIQUE

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Feminist literary criticism is essentially considered to be the political, social and ethical movement for equality of the sexes and to end discrimination against women. "Feminist criticism seeks to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society in works of art" (Nayar 83). As Ross C. Murfin has noted, the "evolution of feminism into feminisms has fostered a more inclusive, global perspective" (Murfin 301-302). The era of recovering women's texts has been succeeded by a new era in which the goal is to recover entire cultures of women. Indeed, feminism has often focussed upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in the favour of men.

Feminist criticism is not a uniquely 20th century phenomenon. It has antecedents going all the way back to ancient Greece, in the work of Sappho and arguably in Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata* which depicts women as taking over the treasury in the Acropolis, a female chorus as physically and intellectually superior to the male chorus. Feminism also "surfaces in Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who blatantly values "experience" over authority and was more than a match for each of her five husbands" (Habib 667). And the nineteenth century witnessed the flowering of numerous major female literary figures in both Europe and America, ranging from Mme de Stael, the Brontes', Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Margaret Fuller and Emily Dickenson. Modernist female writers included Hilda Doolittle (H.D), Gertude Stein, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter.

Among them Elaine Showalter (January 21, 1941) is an influential American literary critic, feminist, and writer on cultural and social issues. She is one of the founders of feminist literary criticism in United States academia, developing the concept and practice of gynocritics. Gynocriticism concerned with the specificity of women's experience and women's writing. Her well known works are *Women's Liberation and Literature*; *Female Studies IV*; *Women's Studies*; *Signs: Journal of Women*; *Culture and Society and A literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (1977)*.

The present paper focusses on Elaine Showalter's the most pioneered work *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1985). Showalter has defined and explored the development of women centered criticism which chiefly focusses on the recovery and re-evaluation of women's writing as an expression of women's experience. Showalter writes:

Feminist Criticism began when women who were students, teachers, writers, editors or simply readers, began to note the limited and secondary roles allotted to fictional heroines, women

writers and female critics, and to ask serious questions about their own literary study” (Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan 179).

In this essay, Showalter asks the question “What is the difference in Women’s writing?” This question began the shift from an androcentric to a gynocentric feminist criticism. Revisionist readings of the male canon can therefore no longer contain the momentum of women’s criticism. Showalter describes four current models of difference taken up by many feminists around the world: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. These models are sequential with each being subsumed and enhanced by the one following. Thus the cultural model provides a more satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women’s writing. Showalter, then, begins the work of providing a ground for feminist criticism, a ground that is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself.

Elaine postulates that *Ecriture Feminine* is largely about women’s repression but also suggests that it has slowly become gynocentric, focussing more on women’s writing. She primarily launched the search for gynocriticism, which should in her description:

Look at the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution of a female literary tradition. (*Critical Inquiry* 184-185).

She acknowledges that all are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. *Ecriture feminine* argues that phallo-centrism validates male creativity and sees it as superior to female creativity. In looking at Helene Cixous’ essay that *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she writes that women to write from the experience of women. She acknowledges and accepts the differences between women and men and she argues that it is because of this difference that women need to learn to write in a different way. (Cixous 878). Elaine Showalter, by contrast, is of the gynocriticism school, and while she does see feminist criticism as “an act of resistance theory” and quotes Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader* mentions that feminist criticism has been characterized by resistance to codification and a refusal to have its parameter prematurely set, the resistance is one that Showalter does not believe, can be most adequately done through creating a new female language and 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. (Guerin 225)

This is in fact the most extreme statement of gender difference, a criticism of text indelibly marked by the body; the internal structure being textuality. According to biological model of difference, “anatomy is textuality.” Feminist criticism totally rejects the attribution of literal biological inferiority preconceived by the Victorian physicians and anthropologists. Showalter writes:

Victorian anthropologists believed that the frontal lobes of the male brain were heavier and more developed than female lobes

and thus that women were inferior in intelligence. (*Critical Inquiry* 187)

Bio-feminist criticism, therefore, generally stresses the significance of the body as a source of imagery which influences women's writing. So, the study of biological imagery in women's writing is useful and important as long as we understand that factors other than anatomy are involved in it. The difference of women's literary practice, therefore, must be sought in Nancy K. Miller's words in "the body of her writing and not the writing of her body."

In the next model of feminist literary criticism; she emphatically deals with women's writing in the context of language i.e. the linguistic model of women's writing. Language as Mary Doly and Julia Kristeva argue, is not an intellectual luxury, but it is an essential part of struggle for women's liberation. In Showalter's essay, the linguistic approach and analysis enter the aura of feminist debate which makes her essay more influential and vigorous. Linguistic and textual theories of women's writing ask many questions about the different use of language by men and women, sex differences in language in terms of biology, socialization or culture, the creation of new language by women etc.

American, French and British feminist critics have all drawn attention to the philosophical, linguistic and practical problems of women's use of language. Many critics have attacked on what Rich calls "the oppressor's language," a language sometimes criticized as sexist, sometimes as abstract. As Nelly Furman explains:

It is through the medium of language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity, which in turn allow us to comprehend the whole world around us. (Furman 182)

The advocacy of a women's language is thus a political gesture that also carries tremendous emotional force. The appropriate task for feminist criticism she believes, 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.

Showalter's psychoanalytic model identifies gender difference in the psyche and also in the artistic process. Showalter asserts, "It incorporates the biological and linguistic models of gender difference in a theory of the female psyche or self, shaped by the body, by the development of language and by sex-role socialization" (Showalter 193-194). Many feminists believe that psychoanalysis could become a powerful tool for literary criticism. But feminist criticism is based on Freudian or Post-Freudian psychoanalysis must continually struggle with the problem of feminine disadvantage and lack.

However, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* Gilbert and Gubar carry out a feminist revision of Harold Bloom's Oedipal model of literary history as a conflict between fathers and sons and accept the essential psychoanalytic definition of the woman artist as displaced, disinherited and excluded. In their view, the nature and "difference" of women's writing lies in its troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity: the woman writer experiences her own gender as "a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy." Moreover, in "*Emphasis Added*," Miller takes another approach to the problem of negativity in psychoanalytic criticism. Her chief motive is to expand Freud's view of female creativity and to show how criticism of women's texts has frequently been unfair because it is according to Freudian expectations.

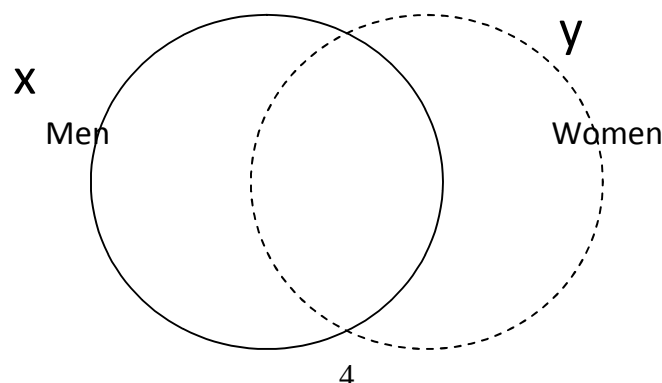
In his essay *The Relation of the Poet to Day Dreaming* (1908), Sigmund Freud maintained that the unsatisfied dreams and desires of women are chiefly erotic; these are the desires that shape the plots of women's fiction. In contrast, the dominant fantasies behind men's plots are egoistic and ambitious as well as erotic. Miller shows how women's plots have been granted or denied credibility in terms of their conformity to this phallogocentric model and that a gynocentric reading reveals a repressed egoistic ambitious fantasy in women's writing as well as in men's. However, if we want to consider the issues related to history, historical change, ethnic difference or the shaping force of generic and economic factors we must go beyond psycho-analysis, for it can only offer us readings of individual texts.

Elaine Showalter's cultural model incorporates ideas about women's body, language and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. It places feminist concerns in social contexts, acknowledging class, racial, national and historical differences and determinants among women. It also offers a collective experience that unites women over time and space—a binding force.

Women's culture redefines women's activities and goals from a women centered point of view. Women's culture refers to the broad-based communality of values, institutions, relationships and methods of communication. Some feminist historians have assigned the model of separate sphere and they have seen the movement from women's sphere to women's culture to women's right activism as the resulting phases in the evolutionary political procedure. "Much of the feminist literary criticism continues in our times to be interpreted with the movement by political feminists for social, legal and cultural freedom and equality" (Abrams 88).

A very particular and enthusiastic analysis of female culture has been given by two Oxford anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener. They have tried to portray a model of women's culture which is not limited historically. Ardener has written two essays *Belief and the Problem of Women* (1972) and *The Problem Revisited* (1975) which suggests that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap but are not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group.

Ardener gives a diagrammatical description to explore the cultural difference between two groups. He calls one group the dominant (male) and the other the muted. By the term "muted" Ardener refers to the problems both of language and of power (Ardener 3). Both of these groups produce ideas and beliefs of social reality at the unconscious level, but dominant groups control the forms or structure in which consciousness can be articulated.



Ardener's groups are represented by two intersecting circles; circle x suggesting dominant male group and circle y suggesting muted female group when we go through and study this model we come to know that a large part of circle y falls within the boundary of dominant circle x; there is also a crescent of y which is outside the dominant boundary and therefore in Ardener's view "the wild" being away from man's influence. Spatially it stands for an area which is literally no man's land, a place forbidden to man. Practically, it stands for the aspects of the female life style which are outside of and unlike those of men. So this is a zone, a corresponding zone of male experience; alien to women.

For some feminist critics, the "wild zone" or "female space" must be the address of genuinely women centered criticism, theory and art. French feminist critics would like to make the wild zone the theoretical base of women's difference. Thus, the difference of women's writing can only be understood in terms of this complex and historically grounded cultural relation.

In a nutshell, feminist criticism has demanded not just the recognition of women's writing, but a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study. Showalter agrees with Sandra Gilbert that feminist criticism wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural identity. Thus, feminist criticism also is committed to expanding the canon to include neglected genres of women's writing, such as diaries, letters, science fiction and the romance.

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