

Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism: A Note

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Abstract

Gynocriticism is the historical study of woman writers as a distinct literary tradition. It refers to a criticism that constructs "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Showalter's two notable essays in feminism Toward a Feminist Poetics and Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness are keys to her female perspectives. In "A Literature of Their Own" Showalter outlines a literary history of women writers, produces a history which shows configuration of their material, psychological and ideological determinants; promotes both a feminist critique (concerned with women readers) and a gynocritics (concerned with women writers). The book examines the British women novelists since the Brontes from the point of view of women's experience. According to Showalter while there is no fixed or innate female sexuality or female imagination, there is nevertheless a profound difference between women's writing and men's, and that a whole tradition of writing has been neglected by male critics. Showalter divides this tradition into three phases. 1. Feminine (1840-1880) 2. Feminist(1880-1920) 3. Female (1920-onwards). Showalter infuses optimism and purpose in her efforts to unify feminist criticism by proposing models of difference to rescue feminism from wilderness: 1. Biographical Model, 2. Linguistic Model, 3. Psychological Model, 4. Cultural Model.

One of America's foremost academic literary scholars, Elaine Showalter is renowned for her pioneering feminist studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century female authors and her provocative cultural analysis of women's oppression in the history of psychiatry. In her influential book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), Showalter advanced a new form of feminist literary theory under the term "gynocriticism," offering an alternative framework for the interpretation of women's literary history. Elaine Showalter coined the term gynocritics in her 1979 essay "Towards a Feminist

Poetics.” Unlike feminist literary criticism, which might analyze works by male authors from a feminist perspective, gynocriticism wanted to establish a literary tradition of women without incorporating male authors. Elaine Showalter felt that feminist criticism still worked within male assumptions, while gynocriticism would begin a new phase of women’s self-discovery. Gynocriticism is the historical study of woman writers as a distinct literary tradition. It refers to a criticism that constructs “a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Showalter’s two notable essays in feminism *Toward a Feminist Poetics* and *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* are keys to her female perspectives. Perhaps they are the compact thesis of what she called the task of gynocritics. In her study of women belonging to different phase of developing feminism, Showalter found that there were no theoretical base of feminist criticism, nor she found neither any particular school in feminism of philosophy, nor any theory of feminism before 1960, which could assert its singular identity like psychoanalytic, new critical theory had. Thus Showalter found criticism in wilderness. She developed a theory of feminist reading against American formalism and established a carefully devised plan of action to achieve the meaning of all ‘ideological assumptions’ of what woman in literature is/was and would be. Tracing reading and writing as two different strategies of creativity, she divides feminist criticism into two distinct varieties

- 1 Feminist Critique- concerned with /represents woman a reader
- 2 Gynocritics *la gynocritique* - concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning, represents woman as writer.

Gynocritics is not an analysis, elucidation, nor assessment but an interpretation made on women in history, society, art, literature, and genres by woman herself. It is more creative act than feminist critique because it can establish woman as genius and intellectual one. Elaine Showalter created different model in feminism which she calls gynocriticism to give feminist criticism distinctive characteristics and status.

- 1) The first purpose of gynocriticism was to restudy well known women authors.
- 2) Second was to rediscover women’s history and culture, particularly women’s communities that nurtured female creativity.
- 3) Third, to rediscover neglected, forbidden or forgotten women writers and thus to make an alternative tradition, a canon that better represents the female perspectives.

In “ A Literature of Their Own” Showalter outlines a literary history of women writers, produces a history which shows configuration of their material, psychological and ideological determinants; promotes both a feminist critique (concerned with women readers) and a gynocritics (concerned with women writers). The book examines the British women novelists since the Brontes from the point of view of women’s experience. According to

Showalter while there is no fixed or innate female sexuality or female imagination, there is nevertheless a profound difference between women's writing and men's, and that a whole tradition of writing has been neglected by male critics. Showalter divides this tradition into three phases.

1) FEMININE (1840-1880) –

It includes Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. In this phase women writers imitated and internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards which required that female authors remain gentlewomen.

2) FEMINISTS (1880-1920)

It includes radical feminist writers as Elizabeth Robins and Oliver Schreier, who protest against male values and advocate separatist utopias and suffragette sisterhood.

3) FEMALE (1920-onwards)

It inherited characteristics of the female period and developed the idea of specifically female writing and female experience in a phase of self-discovery. For Showalter Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson were its most important early female novelists.

In the same period that Joyce and Proust were writing novels of subjective consciousness, Richardson's equally long novels 'Pilgrimage' took its subject female consciousness. Richardson consciously tried to produce elliptical and fragmented sentences in order to convey what she considered to be the shape and texture of the female mind. In the early 70s a more angry tone occurs in the novels of Penelope Mortimer, Mariel Spark and Doris Lessing. Showalter's title indicates her debt to V. Woolf – a passion for women's writing and feminist research..... links both critics. Aware of the invisibility of women's lives, they are active in the essential work of retrieval, trying to find the forgotten precursors. Showalter criticizes Woolf for her retreat into denying her femaleness and for her elusive style. This exactly where Toril Moi disagree with Showalter, and where the focus of the opposition between Anglo-American and French critical feminism may be sharply perceived. For the French Woolf's refusal subversion of her strength whereas the Anglo-American gynocritic wishes to centre on the female author and character, and on female experience as the maker of authenticity which can be represented by way of the literary work.

A feature of the Showalter's work is its reluctance to engage and contain French theoretical initiatives for it is deconstructed by them. Paradoxically at the point when the gynocritics saw themselves as making women's experience and culture positively visible and empowering, poststructuralist feminism textualizes sexuality and regards the whole project of women writing and writing about women as misconceived. Showalter infuses optimism and purpose in her efforts to unify feminist criticism by proposing models of difference to rescue feminism from wilderness.

1) BIOGRAPHICAL MODEL:

Biological differences between man and woman have been the ground on which differential constructions have been built throughout man's history. Victorian physician believed that women's psychological functions diverted twenty percent of their creative energy from brain activity. Making biological differences, once again, a basic feminists reverse the theories, rejecting the theories, rejecting the woman as subordinate construction use this base for erecting massive theoretical framework that privileges women's experiences. The crucial difference is that today's biological oriented feminists wish to regard female body as a resource of creativity extending its range from limitations imposed on them by society. The text of women must focus on uniqueness of woman by interpreting the women's brain as the womb containing source of production. The mother figure of women must be projected.

2) LINGUISTIC MODEL:

It means that through the mediums of language the areas of similarity and differences between men's and women's writing must be defined and categorized. Quoting Mary Jacobus in her essay *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness*, she urges women writer to reinvent the language that will establish the gynocritic character of language. Writers like Virginia Woolf commented sharply upon the traditional linguistic taboos imposed upon women and society's feeling of outrage if women spoke as they felt. It is this reality which is at the bottom of issue regarding for women's language. It is for this reason that French feminists give linguistic study a priority over other considerations and emphasize the need to develop 'women's language'.

3) PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL:

The most essential and basic difference between men and women is perceived in psyche, 'in the relation of gender to the creative process'. French feminists have centered their study on Freudian Neo Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theories seeking to uncover the role of oedipal phase and fantasy about genitals. These theories see women at disadvantage for which psychoanalysis

has the term 'lack'. Miller counters Freudian theory which asserts that women's unsatisfied desires and dreams are mainly erotic and these desires and dreams shape their texts and plots, whereas male desires and dreams are egoistic. Miller feels such distance genderist and gynocritical study reveals 'a repressed egoistic/ambitious fantasy in women's writing as well as in men's. The significance of feminist psychoanalysis for literary criticism is that there can be seen a literary bondage among 'daughters and sisters' to show that psychodynamics of female bonding determine relationship not only among characters but also among writers.

4) CULTURAL MODEL:

A cultural theory foregrounds the separate women's, their social experiences and various ways in which they get expressed. Genda Lerner emphasizes the importance of examining the women's experience in its own terms. In her opinion history has largely ignored women and their feats, their roles and their attainments; there is a need to look into history all over again and focus on women centered inquiry and establish a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women. History would be dramatically different if seen through women's eyes. The model gives scope for women's voice to be presented and recognized in cultural history.

According to Showalter there are two distinct modes of feminist criticism. They are, first, the ideological mode which is concerned with the 'feminist as reader' and second, 'the study of women as writer'.

1) FMINIST AS READER:

It offers feminist readings of the text which consider the image and stereotypes of women in literature. Such reading also considers the omission and misconception about women in criticism. Showalter calls this 'feminist reading' or 'feminist critique'. It is a mode of interpretations.

2) WOMEN AS WRITERS:

Feminist criticism has gradually shifted its center from revisionary readings to sustained investigations of literature by women. Its subjects include- history, styles, and structure of writing by women, psychodynamics of female creativity, collective female career, and laws of female literary tradition. This specialized critical discourse is called 'gynocritics'. Unlike feminist critique, gynocritics offers many theoretical opportunities.

At the conclusion we can say that the emphasis in each country falls somewhat differently. English feminist criticism stresses oppression, French feminist criticism stresses

oppression, and American feminist criticism stresses expression. However all have become gynocritic. Thus Showalter's contributions to feminist criticism and women's studies have helped to influence the canon of British and American literature, bringing new visibility and legitimacy to often forgotten or under-appreciated female authors.

Works Cited:

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