



## FEMINIST CRITICISM: A REVOLUTION OF THOUGHT, A STUDY ON SHOWALTER'S FEMINIST CRITICISM IN THE WILDERNESS

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### ABSTRACT:

*Elaine Showalter's Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness is a significant venture in the field of literary criticism concerned with understanding of women centric mysteries like women's body, psyche, language and the inter-related dynamics of these concepts in the cultural atmosphere women is surviving and struggling to make an identity of her own. Women's writing is a reflection of her own experience and position in the society where she exists as an individual and lives as a female. Her essay is a witness to her struggle to find a terminology that can suggest the feminine to escape from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. To prove her point of view, Showalter has launched and focused on the concept of Gynocriticism.*

*This paper deals with Showalter's ideas in the essay "feminist criticism in the wilderness" as a revolution of thought. The paper will examine what feminist theoretical view does underlay Showalter's essay "feminist criticism in the wilderness" and it will discuss why "feminist criticism in the wilderness" as a revolution of thought by indicating to her new ideas that she has brought to the field of literary feminism as feminist critics and writer as well.*

*Showalter brings up a new vision to feminist criticism. She reviews in her essay lots of feminist critical views which have been brought before her, and she explains the problems with such views.*

**Keywords:** feminism; criticism; wilderness; revolution; thought; Showalter.

### INTRIDUCTION:

Feminist critical theory and practice is the product of the Feminist Movement that took place during the 1960s and 1970s. It is a critique of the patriarchal mode of thinking and its political approach towards literature and literary criticism. The patriarchal mode of thinking subordinates women to men in familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic domains. This patriarchal ideology teaches women to internalize these concepts in the process of their socialization. Among those eminent feminist critics who brought up feminist criticism is Elaine Showalter (January 21, 1941). She 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)

### **"Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" as a Revolution of Thought in Feminist Criticism**

First, the essay highlights the need for feminist theories to work out a framework they can share. She shows that by stating



"An early obstacle to constructing a theoretical framework for feminist criticism was the unwillingness of many women to limit or bound an expressive and dynamic enterprise"

To Showalter, the real obstacle of not forming theoretical framework for feminist criticism was because many women are unwilling to establish that and they limited themselves to the expressive and dynamic style.

Then Showalter shows the rejection for both imitation and protest, she advocates approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current female phase, rather than from perspective that traditionally come from an endocentric perspective like psychoanalytic and biological theories, for example. Feminist in the past have worked with within these traditions by revising and criticizing female representations, or lack thereof, in the male traditions.

Showalter says, " A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space"

She doesn't advocate replacing psychoanalysis, for example, with cultural anthropology, rather, she suggests that approaching woman's writing from a cultural perspective is one among many valid perspectives that will uncover female traditions. However, cultural anthropology and social history are especially fruitful because " Cultural anthropology and social history can perhaps offer us a terminology and a diagram of women's cultural situation". But feminist critics must use this concept in relation to what women actually write, not in relation to a theoretical, political, metaphoric, or visionary ideal of what women ought to write."

She is going on to not advocate a separation of the female tradition. She argues that woman must work both inside and outside the male tradition simultaneously. Showalter says the most constrictive approach to future feminist theory and criticism lies in the focus on nurturing a new feminine cultural perspective within a feminist tradition that at the same time exist within the male tradition, but no which it is not dependent and to which it is not answerable.

Showalter continues to argue that there are essentially two kinds of feminist theories. The first concerns itself with the women as a reader and may be called feminist critic. The second concerns itself with the women as a writer and may be called Gynocritics. It deals with the women as the producer of the textual meaning. Showalter bases her theory on four models – biological criticism, linguistic criticism, psycho-analytical criticism and the theory of women's culture.

Therefore, Showalter suggests gynocritics theories which are centered on the experience of women as writers. Gynocriticism is a term coined in the seventies by Elian Showalter to describe a new literary project intended to construct "a framework for the analysis of woman literature". By expanding the historical study of woman writers as a distinct literary tradition. Gynocritics sought to develop new models based on the study of female experience to the replace male of



literary criticisms. gynocriticism was designed as a "second phase" in feminist criticism. Turning to force on, and interrogation of female authorship, images, the feminine experience and ideology and the history development of the female literary tradition.

Gynocriticism also examines the female struggle for identity and the social construct of gender. According to Elian Showalter, gynocritics is the study on not only the female as a gender status but also the internalized consciousness of the female. The uncovering of the female subculture and exposition of the female model is intensification of the gynocriticism. Comprising recognition of a distinct female canon where a female identity is sought free from the masculine definition and opposition.

Gynocriticism accordingly challenged a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective whereby the female inherently suffers envy of men and feeling of inadequacy and injustice, combined with feeling of intellectual inferiority. Arguing that male phallic produce itself create a female consciousness that demands a critique and the prejudice against the female incites a specific noise and gets attributed to the female. Gynocriticism stressed that this prejudice has concealed the female literary tradition to the point of imitating the masculine.

After her coining the term of gynocriticism she shows the perishing of literary critics in the wilderness "Matthew Arnold also thought that literary critics might perish in the wilderness before they reached the promised land of disinterestedness." (308). She shows how Arnold considers that all literary critics might perish in the wilderness in their search of the promised land. Arnold seems here to refer to the satisfactory judgment of criticism. Similarly, Showalter seems to have the view on feminist criticism in particular.

She continues to show that the critics seem to be still wandering in the wilderness since there is still disinterestedness of the theory of criticism. Moreover, the situation of criticism is still bound exclusively to the masculine domain. She states that clearly by saying:

"But if, in the 1980s, feminist literary critics are still wandering in the wilderness, we are in good company; for, as Geoffrey Hartman tells us, all criticism is in the wilderness. Feminist critics may be startled to find ourselves in this band of theoretical pioneers, since in the American literary tradition the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain. Yet between feminist ideology and the liberal ideal of disinterestedness lies the wilderness of theory, which we too must make our home." (308)

This quote shows what Showalter aims at by saying "we too must make our home", she states here that feminist criticism should not continue to be in the wilderness. They should make their own theoretical views of criticism. "Women have no wilderness in them, they are provident instead, content in the tight hot cell of their hearts, to eat dusty bread". Louise Bogan, 'Women' Showalter opines that feminist literary critics are "still wandering in the wilderness" and that the wilderness of theory lies between feminist ideology and the liberal ideal of disinterestedness. She is of the view that the feminist critic's assignment of interpretation of works has to be satisfied



with Pluralism. This aspect of her essay concludes with the message to the readers that, feminist criticism is supposed to possess its own subject, lay the foundation of its own system and the must is its own voice.

She goes on to show feminist criticism lacks "theoretical basis". She states that till the time there has not been any theoretical manifesto for feminist criticism. She states that clearly as:

“Until very recently, feminist criticism has not had a theoretical basis; it has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm. In 1975, I was persuaded that no theoretical manifesto could adequately account for varied methodologies and ideologies which called themselves feminist reading or writing.” (308)

Showalter, then, moves further to show real examples of feminist critics by commenting on Virginia Woolf who, to Showalter, devoted herself to expressive style. She shows that Virginia Woolf in her essay represented her life experience, and how she didn't allow to the library. Her writing style is "reflexive". By showing this example Showalter asks the other female writers to change the style of writing. To make ourselves as equal to the masculine domain. What Showalter condemns in Virginia Woolf's essay is the reflexive personal writing and presentation of her own personal experiences rather than bringing up new critical views to improve feminist criticism. Hence, Woolf has made such presentation of the essay in personal reflection, Showalter considered this not to be a real contribution to the development of feminist criticism. To Showalter feminist criticism does not need any personal reflections rather it needs to a set of rules and views to structure a way of judgment to feminist discourse.

Recalling in *A Room of One's Own* how she had been prohibited from entering the university library, the symbolic sanctuary of the male logos, Virginia Woolf wisely observed that while it is 'unpleasant to be locked out . . . it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.' Advocates of the ant theoretical position traced their descent from Woolf and from other feminist visionaries, such as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich and Marguerite Duras, who had satirized the sterile narcissism of male scholarship and celebrated women's fortunate exclusion from its patriarchal ideology. (309)

This leads Showalter to show that feminist criticism has become an act of resistance to theory since the women feminist critics themselves have cared on the reflexive style and the dynamicity of asserting self-authority. Therefore, Showlater states:

“criticism was an act of resistance to theory, a confrontation with existing canons and judgments, what Josephine Donovan calls 'a mode of negation within a fundamental dialectic'. As Judith Fetterley declared in her book, *The Resisting Reader*, feminist criticism has been characterized by 'a resistance to codification and a refusal to have its parameters prematurely set.’” (309)



To conclude, Showalter thinks that women have been too much obsessed with male critical theory. Feminist critics have sought to modify, humanize, revise or attack it. There is no doubt in the fact that feminist criticism is in some sense revisionist. Showalter wants feminist critics to have their own subjects, theory and voice. They should be open to women's studies and feminist critical.

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