



## THE DYNAMICS OF BODY, LANGUAGE, PSYCHE AND CULTURE IN ELAINE 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. This paper is an attempt to answer the basic question: what is a women's writing? Is it really different from a man's writing? What are the concerns of a woman while writing? And what actually influences her? 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. Showalter has grounded her essay based on four distinct sequential models: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural.

**Key words:** Feminist criticism, Gynocriticism, Women's writing, Body, Psyche, Culture, Language.

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### INTRODUCTION

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)

Born on 21 January 1941 Elaine Showalter, an American critic has done a remarkable job in the field of literary criticism, feminism, social and cultural issues. Considered as one of the founders of feminist literary criticism, she is well known for developing the concept of Gynocritics. She has proved her in-depth understanding and critical and

analytical prowess in various fields which is reflected in her various literary works. Some of which are:

*Toward a Feminist Poetics* (1979), *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture (1830–1980)* (1985), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (1990), *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997), and *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (2001).

Showalter in her work *Toward a Feminist Poetics* broadly categorizes women literature into three phases:

**First phase:** Feminine: (1840–1880), refers to the era where woman writers focused on equaling their male counterparts in terms of intellectual

achievements and in turn employed internalized assumptions regarding the female nature.

**Second phase:** Feminist: (1880–1920) was more oriented towards feminine writing as a tool of protest against the values and standards set by their male counterparts. Advocacy of feminine rights with a desire for complete autonomy was characteristic of this phase.

**Third phase:** Female phase (1920– ) This phase marks self-discovery and rejection of any form of dependency emphasizing on feminine experience as the genesis and source of an independent stream of literature.

Who and what, then do we mean by “feminist”?

That word...poses some serious problems. Not that we would want to end up demanding a definition

of what feminism is, and therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire the epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least.

“Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women.”

-Alice Jardine

Originating from the Latin word feminine the concept of feminism evolved as a tool for equality in rights and status of women in society. It characterized the struggle for obtaining basic social, economic and legal rights of women that has been a civilizational denial to them.

The term feminism varies in implication in its social and cultural context. While the French correlate feminism with sexual expression, the British often employ it against male dominion. The Americans view feminism as an independence syndrome.

Thinkers such as Alice Walker, Naomi Littlebear, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Lillian Smith, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and others have perceived, propounded, propagated, and popularized the concept of feminism as a literary movement that has transformed literature over the ages. Though it is modern in its outlook in so far as seeking independence from male dominion is concerned but

primarily the struggle is historical in perspective. With the modern socio-cultural concepts assuring equality feminism as a literary concept may well be outdated. Hence, the current context of feminism has to be viewed in a broader sense of awareness of female identity and analysis of feminine problems rather than a mere tool of advocacy for equal rights.

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

Simone de Beauvoir

Published in 1981 *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* proves to be more challenging, adventurous being engaged in various theories; which gives a new look and dimension in the field of feminist criticism.

*“It now appears that what looked like a theoretical impasse was actually an evolutionary phase.”*

#### **Pluralism and the Feminist Critique:**

“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.

#### **Defining the Feminine: Gyno-critics:**

“A woman’s writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine”.-  
-Virginia Woolf

"It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing and this is an impossibility that will remain for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist."

Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa".

In this phase of her essay, she emphasizes more on the self of women, where she discovers herself being independent of any influence of the patriarchal system of writing or masculine models and theories. Feminine writing should be autonomous, the self-exploration of the women as an individual who has its own defined perspectives of visualizing, understanding, interpreting and representing her thoughts. Women has to get rid of the age old dominating patriarchal form of writing and refine and redefine her views in a new perspective which is supposed to be her own.

"The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all human creatures —nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other."

-Simone de Beauvoir

There emanate two distinct modes and four models in Showalter's criticism of Feminist writing, it thus becomes imperative to take these two modes into account in order to avoid being weigh down by theoretical possibilities.

Ideological : In this mode the reader is viewed as feminist and thus deals with analysis of text with images and stereotypes of feminine characters in literature, the fallacies and myths about women under criticism and of course women-as-sign in the available semiotic systems. Additionally, this mode also aims to achieve a liberating intellectual act as propounded by Adrienne Rich:

"A radical critique of literature feminist in its impulse, would the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name-and therefore live –afresh."

Literary: In this mode criticism is directed at analyzing the works of women as writers, it dwells in

genres, styles, themes, history and structures of feminist writings. It also probes psychodynamics of feminine creativity vis-à-vis the path taken by feminine careers and the evolution and consolidation of traditions in feminist literature. This attention to female literary creations in English is also influenced by French and Marxist theories which rely heavily on textual interpretations.

Showalter's analysis is an investigation of four distinct theoretical models that explore the exclusivity of Gynocentric and Androcentric criticism. The four models include Biological, Linguistic, Psychoanalytic and cultural. Every model is an attempt to identify, categorize and differentiate the inherent typicality of the women as a writer and the text pertaining to women.

#### **Women's writing and Woman's body:**

*More body, hence more writing.*

Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa'

"Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other."

- Simone de Beauvoir

The ultimate definition of gender difference is symbolized by the female body where anatomy is treated as the text as well as context. Feminist criticism relies heavily on biology as the foundation of theoretical formulations. But a mere reference to anatomy has the potential of showcasing crude essentialism which true inspiration from the artistic theories of phallus and ovary that were oppressive in nature. In fact, various anthropologists of the Victorian era propounded male superiority as a direct result of biological and evolutionary development of the male brain.

Despite the outright rejection by feminist criticism of any biological male superiority in literary works, there still are some proponents of theories that accept allegorical implications of distinctness in female writing. This is best depicted in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The madwoman in the attic" where analysis is based upon metaphors corroborating the inevitability of paternity in literature.

French and American feminist critics have often emphasized the need to revisit the biological differences pertaining to female literary works. In fact they point out that since feminine writing relies heavily on the body therefore the sexual differentiation is a primary aspect of all feminine literary works. Those critics dealing in biological perspective often bank upon the female body for visual inspiration.

Defining and conceptualizing the body is essential to understand how women in general view themselves and their position in society. Hence, the uniqueness of female writing lies in “the body of her writing and not the writing of her body”.

#### **Women’s writing and women’s language:**

The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designates what men have appropriated.

-Monique Wittig, *Les Guerilleres*

The dilemma is whether sex influence language and each such linguistic difference discernible in biological, cultural or social fields. Do women writers evolve new linguistic patterns and if so is feminine reading and writing characterized by these patterns. The complexities in feminine linguistics have been well debated by American, French and British feminist critics. In fact such analysis is an area of prime focus in Gynocriticism.

Recent French feminist literary works indicates a defiance of patriarchal linguistic. This influence of gender on language is also reflected in ancient epics, mythological literature and cultural folklores. The male imagination of the mystical feminine character is the essence of ancient literature.

Even colonial history is replete with outstanding examples of feminine literature written in typical women’s language. In fact attention to the language perspective in feminine criticism is a post-colonial phenomenon. There emerges a competition between established literary networks and the common female language as used in social fields.

Both American as well as English linguistics admit that there may be no concrete evidence to prove that gender influences the style, structure and tone in linguistic systems. Additionally, it is impossible to pin point speech and annotations that can be labeled as gender specific. Thus the job of feminist critics revolves around the accessibility of women to the spectrum of language and lexicons to choose words from rather than identifying the “female specific language”. The dichotomy lies in the fact that it is not the inadequacy of language that inhibits investigations by feminine critics. Rather it is the lack of access to the range of language options by women writers which is more disturbing. This point to the fact that women may have been deprived of the options from the complete linguistic spectrum, thereby implying a forced silence or circumlocution of female writers.

“All that we ought to be expressed – mind and body”.

#### **Women’s writing and Woman’s psyche:**

“To call women the weaker sex is libel; it is man’s injustice to women.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Psychoanalytic mode: This mode of criticism of feminine writing focuses on the author’s psyche and relates the gender to the creative aspect of the writing. It creates linguistic and biological models based on assumptions of female psychology which is believed to be shaped by the female body and female social status. This kind of criticism is oriented to feminine writing that depicts obfuscated female identity, tumultuous relationships and hurtful experiences of the women writer extending even to a belief of inadequacy of the self.

The most recent and outstanding feminine psychoanalysis focuses on the pre-oedipal phase and psycho social differences of the female writer. However the significance of this mode of criticism is often debated. The only confirmed source of feminine creativity that has been identified by this mode of criticism is the Mother – Daughter relationship.

#### **Women’s writing and Women’s culture:**

I consider women’s literature as a specific category, not because of biology, but because it is, in a sense, the literature of the colonized.

Christiane Rochefort, 'The Privilege of Consciousness'

Cultural mode: This form of criticism is by far the most comprehensive means of analyzing the typicality and exclusivities of female writing. It includes concepts and theories that encompass the body, language, and psyche of women. It then attempts to co-relate all three in the social fields of occurrence.

Social and cultural environment of women are directly related to their sexual and reproductive functions. Thus feminine psyche can also be defined as the sum total of all cultural forces that includes social push and pulls. The linguistic, social and cultural ideals of feminist literature thus influence the cultural mode of criticism. The theory accepts that class, ethnicity, geographical locality, nationality and historical experiences produce distinct variants of women as writers. However it is the overall feminine culture or the experience of womanhood in society which provides the underlying binding force amongst all women writers.

Ardener's theory of relationship between the dominant and muted group in literary works proposes that women or the muted group despite the zones of cultural overlap do have an exclusive zone which is devoid of any influence from the dominant male group. This zone is termed as no man's land by Ardener. Most feminist critics consider this as the true fields for genuine feminist criticism. Ardener's model proves that women writing has both the influenced aspect inspired by the dominant group with its own under currents of the main stream as well as the exclusive female space that is completely uninfluenced by biological, social or cultural forces.

Therefore the model helps us to see feminist writing in two voices: one influenced and the other wild.

To conclude, no single or particular model can completely or comprehensively cover the entire gamut of feminist criticism while Geertz and Ardener's cultural model throws new light on the subject, the psychoanalytic models of Freud, Lacan and Bloom form the very basis of such criticism. Social, cultural and historical influences in women's writing can be analyzed from both the angles.

Contrary to the early belief that true feminist criticism can emerge only when the influence of gender is negated, it is the intrinsic relationship with gender influences that can comprehensively cover feminist criticism. It is the amalgamation of influence and wilderness which can truly define the subject.

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