



ELAINE SHOWALTER'S CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE ESSAY - "FEMINIST CRITICISM IN WILDERNESS"

KRISHMA CHAUDHARY* (M. phil., English)

Department of English,
Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa



KRISHMA CHAUDHARY

Article Info:

Article Received: 18/11/2013

Revised on: 28/11/2013

Accepted on: 29/11/2013

ABSTRACT

The present research work deals with the critical examination of Showalter's ideas in the essay "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness." We examine that what feminist theoretical view does underlay Showalter's essay "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness" and we have to discuss the terms Feminist Critic and gynocritics in the light of this essay. Elaine Showalter is professor of English at Princeton and a well-known critic and literary theorist. Her book "A Literature of their Own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing (1977)" quickly established as a standard textbook in the rapidly burgeoning of woman's studies. Contemporary feminist criticism obviously derived its original impetus from the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s. Mary Eilman's "Thinking about Women (1968)" and Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics (1970)" being pioneering books in this respect. The initial effort of feminist critics was to revise orthodox "male literary history, exposing sexual stereotyping in canonical texts and reinterpreting of reviving the work of women writers. Elaine Showalter's "A Literature of their Own" was a major contribution to this project but by the late 1970s; it seemed to her that feminist criticism had reached "a theoretical impasse." In a lecture delivered in 1978 entitled, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" published in "Women's writing and writing about women" ed. Mary Jacobus (1978) and reprinted in "The New Feminist Criticism" ed. Showalter (1985), she attributed this impasse to the essentially male character of "theory itself", as practised and professionally institutionalized in the academy.

In "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness" first published in "Criticism Enquiry" in 1981, she finds feminist criticism no more unified, but more adventurous in assimilating and engaging with theory, it now appears that what looked like a theoretical impasse was actually an evolutionary phrase. This lucid and informative survey of contemporary feminist criticism is backed up with notes that constitute a valuable bibliography of the field. It is reprinted here from "The New Feminist Criticism" edited by Elaine Showalter (1985). In this essay we discussed the various points of contemporary feminist criticism and we discussed the terms Feminist Critic and Gynocritic in the light of this essay.

INTRODUCTION

Elaine Showalter (born January 21, 1941) is an 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. Showalter's best known works 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 Siede (1990), Hystories: Hysterical and Epidemics and Modern Media (1997), and Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage (2001)." In 2007, Showalter was the chair of the judges for the prestigious British literary award, the man Booker International prize.

In "Towards a Feminist Poetics", Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

1.Feminine: In the Feminine phase (1840-1880) "Woman wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture and internalized its assumptions about female nature."

2.Feminist: The Feminist phase (1880-1920) was characterized by women's writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.

3.Female: The Female phase (1920-) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says "Women reject both imitation and protest-two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature." Rejecting both imitation and protest Showalter advocated approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current female phase, rather than from perspectives that traditionally come from an androcentric perspective like psychoanalytic and biological theories for example. Feminists in the past have worked with in these traditions by revising and criticizing female representatives, or lack these off, in the male traditions.

In her essay "Feminist criticism in Wilderness (1981), Showalter says, "A cultural theory acknowledges that these 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 with in the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space." Showalter does not advocate replacing psychoanalysis, for example, with cultural

anthropology; rather, she suggests that approaching women's writing from a cultural perspective is one among many valid perspectives. However, cultural anthropology and social history are especially fruitful because they "can perhaps offer us a terminology and a diagram of women's cultural situation" (New 264). Showalter's caveat is that feminist critics must use cultural analyses as ways to understand what women write, rather than to dictate what they ought to write (New, 266). However isolationist – like Showalter's perspective may sound at first, she does not advocate a separation of the female tradition. She argues that women must work both inside and outside the male tradition simultaneously (New, 264). Showalter says the most constructive approach to further feminist theory and criticism lies in a focus on nurturing a new feminine cultural perspective with in a feminist tradition that at the same time exists within the male tradition, but on which it is not dependent and to which it is not answerable.

DISCUSSION

Elaine Showalter is a well-known feminist critic who is credited with authentic views on feminist criticism. She is one of the influential feminist scholars and a highly regarded critic. She is known basically for her provocative and strongly held opinions. The essay "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness" first appeared in the general "Critical Enquiry" in 1981. In the essay, Showalter presents a comprehensive survey of contemporary feminist criticism. The essay highlights the need for feminist theories to work out a frame work they can share. Showalter suggests gynocritics theories which are centred on the experience of women as writers. Showalter argues 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 textural meaning. Showalter bases her theory on four models – biological criticism, linguistic criticism, psycho-analytical criticism and the theory of women's culture.

In the first section of the essay, Showalter quotes two critics- namely, Carolynn Heilbrun, Catharine Stimpson who have said that feminist

criticism has been riveted (limited) to two poles. The first cares for the wrong committed in the past where as the second looks for grace of imagination. In any case, there is no theoretical basis of this criticism. An important reason for this is that there have been too many different ways and ideologies related to it. Showalter recalls the year 1975 when she was herself convinced that no theoretical declaration could explain properly the different ideologies going under feminist reading and writing. The strategies adopted by feminist critic were not fixed. The objective of this criticism continue to be incoherent and multiple. This situation gave way to a certain anxiety at isolation of feminist criticism from theory based male criticism. A debate followed in Europe and United States about how feminist criticism should define itself with relation to the new critical theories. Even this phase has been termed evolutionary by Elaine Showalter.

Looking at the contemporary state of feminist criticism, Showalter gives two modes – feminist critic and gynocritic. The feminist critic is also called feminist reading because it deals with the feminist as a reader. This is essentially a mode of interpretation and it has to complete with alternative readings. Showalter believes that the field of interpretation depends on many sources and has a very wide range.

She quotes Kolodny, the most sophisticated theorist of feminist interpretation. She considers it to be the right of a feminist to liberate new and different meaning from a text. The feminist is also entitled to choose those features of a text which she thinks to be relevant to her cause. Showalter doesn't agree with Kolodny in the rejection of a conceptual model. She believes that in order to define woman and to understand the process and context of writing, theoretical consensus is urgently required.

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 theories.

The second mode of feminist criticism has

been called gynocritics by Showalter after the French term "La Gyna Critique." This is concerned with the study of women as writers and the producers of textual meaning. Their subjects of study are history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing produced by women writers. In Showalter's words, "gynocritics offer many theoretical opportunities." Showalter bases her theory of gynocritics on concepts like body, language, psyche and culture related to women. In the section titled women's writing and women's body, she opines that feminist criticism rejects biological inferiority in words. It is observed that female writers use body images in a more frank manner. Biological criticism believes that biological differentiation is fundamental to understand how women see themselves in relation to society. It is also instrumental in understanding how they represent themselves in writing.

In the section "women's writing and women's language", Showalter examines these feminist theories which have grounding in language and text. These theories are based upon the presumption that language helps us to categories and comprehend things around us. Linguistic criticism examines possible differences in the ways women and men use language, explores reason for these differences. Its strength is the powerful emotional appeal of the notion of women's language. In the next section, Showalter analysis psychoanalytical feminist criticism, this criticism is a model of difference based on the relationship between gender and creative process. Showalter takes up psychological theorists Freud and Jung. She explains the impact of various theories on literary criticism. Showalter's treatment of the relationship between women's writing and women's culture is more detailed. She considers this approach to be more satisfying than others based upon women's body language or psyche. According to her, "A theory of culture incorporates ideas about women's body, language and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social context in which they occur." Women's culture and men's culture are represented by two interesting circles. One of these is specific to women and the other is specific to men. Historically women have been the muted group and men the dominant group. According to Showalter, feminist theories need to articulate the

area specific to men and put it at the centre of women's writing. Showalter believes that one of the great advantages of women's culture model is that it shows how the female's tradition can be positive source of strength as well as a negative source of powerlessness.

CONCLUSION

Showalter concludes by cautioning against replacing the psychoanalytical theories Freud, Lacan and Bloom with the theories of new white Father's like Ardener and Geertz. However, no theory can be a substitute for close and extensive knowledge of women's text. Finally, it may be concluded that the term gynocriticism given by Showalter is an attempt to view the problem in its essential and unbiased manner.

REFERENCES

- Showalter Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness", *Critical Enquiry* 8. University of Chicago: Winter, 1981.
- Showalter Elaine. "Toward a Feminist Poetics", *Women's Writing and Writing about Women*. London: Groom Helm, 1979.
- Showalter Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. Princeton, N. J: Princeton University Press, 1977.