

## ELAINE SHOWALTER'S CONTRIBUTION TO FEMINIST CRITICISM

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### ABSTRACT:

*This paper tries to highlight Elaine Showalter's contribution to feminist criticism. Feminist literary criticism is concerned with equality of sexes and end to discrimination against women. It seeks to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society in works of art. In her essay Towards A Feminist poetics Showalter tries to analyze the field of feminist criticism from different points of views. She suggests some changes that are required to make the field more effective. Showalter advocates independent model of feminist literary theory and rejects the male models and theories and recall the history of women's writing to the present. She has brought a new vision to feminist criticism.*



**KEY WORDS:** equality of sexes, discrimination, ideology, patriarchal society.

### INTRODUCTION :

Elaine Showalter, an American critic and literary theorist is professor of English at Princeton. Her book *A Literature of their Own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) received as a standard textbook in the rapidly burgeoning of woman's studies. Showalter has coined the term, "gynocriticism", which is a woman-centric approach to literary analysis. Her *A Literature of their Own* unfolds the female literary tradition which she analyses as an evolution through three phases. They are: *Feminine Phase* (1840-1880) during which women writers imitated the dominant (male) tradition. *Feminist Phase* (1880-1920) during which women advocated minority (women's) rights and protested and *Female Phase* (1920 onwards) during which dependency is being replaced by a rediscovery of women's texts and women.

Showalter also posits that feminist criticism falls into two categories: 1) Woman as reader (Feminist Critique) and 2) Woman as writer (Gynocriticism). In the first part, women are considered the consumers of a male-produced literature. It is concerned with searching the stereotypical representations of women, breach in male-oriented literary theory and how patriarchy manipulated the women audiences. Gynocriticism tries to build a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and focus on female subjectivity, language and literary career.

### GYNOCRITICISM:

Elaine Showalter in her essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' has coined the term 'gynocriticism' for – the scholarship concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning. It is concerned with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. It is also concerned with the psychodynamics of female creativity; the path of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution of a female literary tradition. She further contends that the criticism by "gynocritics is more self contained and experimental." Gynocriticism is concerned with the specificity of women's writings (gynotexts) and women's experiences. It focuses on female subjectivity, female language and female literary career, and attempts to construct a

female framework for the analysis of literary work. Showalter notes that if we study stereotypes of women, the sexist bias of male critics and the limited roles women performed in literary history, we are unable to learn what women have felt and experienced. It will only lead us to know what men have thought women should be. Therefore, gynocritics seek to read male created texts and female created texts to produce a literary category called 'women-centred criticism', highlighting the female experience, rather than adopt male models and theories.

One of the main concerns of gynocritics is to identify what is taken to be the distinctively feminine subject matter in literature written by women- for example- the world of domesticity, or the special experiences of gestation, giving birth and nurturing or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations- in which personal and affectional issues, and not external activism, are the primary interest. Another concern of gynocriticism is to uncover in literary history, a female tradition. A third undertaking is to show that there is a distinctive feminine mode of experience or 'subjectivity', in thinking, feeling, valuing and perceiving oneself and the outer world.

It is to Elaine Showalter's essays that we should turn to see how feminist criticism can be rescued from its 'wilderness'. The diversity or plurality in feminist criticism has been due to the feminist's concerns with theory, language and psychology rather than to literature. She regrets the want of a unified goal set for them by all feminist critics. Showalter infuses optimism and purpose in her efforts to unify feminist criticism by proposing four models of difference to rescue feminism from its 'wilderness'.

**1) Biological Model:** which means the projection of gender difference in women's writing. The texts by women must focus on the uniqueness of women. The uniqueness must be metaphorically brought out; by interpreting the woman's brain as the womb containing sources of production. The mother figure of woman must be projected, not the sex part of woman.

**2) Linguistic Model:** by which Showalter means that through the medium of language the areas of similarity and difference between men's writing and women's writings must be defined and categorised. Quoting Mary Jacobs, she exhorts women writers to reinvent language that will establish the gynocentric character of a language

**3) Psychoanalytical Model:** Showalter regrets that Freud's designating women's psyche as 'hysteric' and Lacan calling women 'castrated male', have relegated women's writing. Women's writing must strive for relating the present writers to their precursors and to establish their own tradition.

**4) Cultural Model:** by which Showalter means interpreting the women's writings in relation to cultural contexts, binding all women writers over time and space. She points out that women should realise their 'duality' – both as partakers of women's culture and also as living within a general culture which includes women as well.

To conclude, feminist literary criticism was influenced by multiple literary theories and criticism. There was a need to congregate them into an organic whole to expose objective reality. Showalter has tried to rescue the feminist criticism from its wilderness. She provides an innovative concept and suggests the feminine to escape from its stereotypical associations with inferiority.

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