

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ANALYSING SHOWALTER’S ESSAY ‘TOWARDS A FEMINIST POETICS’

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse Elaine Showalter’s essay, ‘Towards a Feminist Poetics’. It analyses how Showalter advocates a new way to read and criticise literature. It also analyses the division of women’s literature, made by Showalter, into three phases. It analyses the two varieties in which feminist criticism can be divided. This paper attempts to understand the problem that arises due to stereotypical feminist criticism of literature. This paper also attempts to explain the term ‘Gynocritics’ mentioned by Showalter in her essay ‘Towards a feminist Poetics’.

Keywords: Feminist, poetics, women’s literature, stereotypical feminist criticism, gynocritics

Elaine Showalter is an American literary critic and a feminist. She is a writer of cultural and social issues. She is one of the founders of feminist literary criticism and developed the concept of gynocritics and also practiced it in United States Academia. She is well known in the field of popular culture. ‘Towards a Feminist Poetics’ is one of her well know essays that focused on the feminist literary criticism of the literature. In this essay, Showalter has rejected the inevitability of the male theories and male models by tracing the history of women’s literature in the present writing.

The title of Showalter’s essay includes the word ‘Feminist Poetics’. By this term, Showalter means the systematic and the scientific way in which feminine literature accounts and functions. Feminist poetics promotes the feminist principles in any piece of literary work. According to Showalter, feminist poetics is a term that creates a female framework which analyses the women literature and which further can be analysed by the women critics. It should develop new models based on the experiences of women alone. Feminist poetics is a study of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

linguistics and the female language in the literary text. Showalter further analyses this term by categorizing the feminist criticism into two different types. The first type deals with the woman as the consumer of the male literary product, that is, a literary text created by men. This type of feminist criticism is concerned with women as the readers and critics of male produced literature. When females read a literary text, they have different type of hypothesis and they interpret that text in a different way than male readers. This hypothesis of a woman reader can change the apprehension of that literary text and can also awaken among us, the importance of the sexual codes in that particular text. In such feminist criticism of a text, feminists try to trace out the stereotypical portrayal of women in the male produced texts. Another type that Showalter mentions in her essay is 'gynocritics'. This term presents woman as the writer and the producer of literary texts. Here, women produce the textual meaning of the text that includes history, genres, themes and structures of literature by woman. According to Showalter, this is the true model for female writing, which is independent of male model, stereotypes, values and norms. This model represents the position of female writers in the history of literature. Gynocritics literally avoid considering any produced theories and models.

It only seeks purely feminine writing. Since past, male literature was popular and hence only male writer had their own tradition. But here in this essay, Showalter claims that just like males, female writers also have their own tradition. She says that women are different from men in every aspect, such as race, nature, culture, etc. Showalter writes, "Gynocritics begins when women free themselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history and when stop trying to fit in the lines of male traditions". (Showalter) She mentions that one of the problems arise by feminist criticism is that, it revolves around the male produced writing and their opinions. Females should write about themselves, their experiences and feelings and should not stick to criticising the male opinions and stereotypes, the sexism of male critics and the limited roles that woman had in the history of literature. Such feminist criticism only talks about what men think of women and not about what women think of themselves. Showalter says that we have studied woman writers in isolation and never tried to find connections between them. Going beyond the writers such as, Austen, Bronte and Eliot, one can see the patterns and the phases of evolution of the female tradition that corresponds the developmental phases of any subcultural art. Showalter calls these the feminine, feminist and female stages in her book, 'A Literature of their Own'. She reconstructed the past of the history of women literature by dividing women writers into three stages. From 1840-1880, was the first phase named as the 'Feminine Phase'. Women writers of this era such as the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot followed the male norms that internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Some female writers wrote in the male pseudonyms and identified themselves with the male culture as, in that era, women were not allowed to write. From 1880-1920, was the 'Feminist Phase'. The literature of this phase included Elizabethan Robins, Frances Trollope, etc. The female writers of this phase, unlike the previous phase, protested against the male canons, values and the texts that stereotyped women. This was the period of separatist utopia. In fact, in this phase, women wrote biases of males. The last phase which started in 1920 and is going on till date, is the 'Female Phase'. The female writers, like Rebecca West, Dorothy Richardson and Katherine Mansfield, avoided both the imitation of the feminine writers as well as the protest of the feminist writers. They believed that both these things represent dependency on males. This led the female writers to the phase of self-discovery. According to Showalter, the feminist criticism revised and subverted the ideologies of Marxist aesthetics as well as structuralism and also altered their vocabularies and methods to include the variable of gender in them. She concludes her essay by saying that the current theoretical impasse in the feminist criticism has come from the divided consciousness of women and the split in each of them. She also says that women are the daughters of the male tradition which asks them to be rational, grateful and marginal and are also the sisters in a new women's movement which demands them to renounce the pseudo-success of taken womanhood. Showalter states that the task of every feminist critic is to produce their own language that is different from the male language, and which can integrate women's intelligence as well as can experience women's reasons and sufferings. Lastly, she says that this feminist criticism is not visiting, that is, it's not just a phase that should change after some period, but this should be the ideal way of feminist criticism and hence this criticism is here to stay.

To conclude, Showalter calls for a separate and autonomous model of literary theory for women, totally different from male writers. In her essay, she totally rejects the male models as well as rejects the feminist criticism that is male-oriented. She also recalls the women's literary tradition to the present and confidently states that this feminist criticism that she advocated is here to stay forever.

REFERENCES

Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics." Essay. 1979.