



Towards a Feminist Poetics by Elaine Showalter: Elucidated through the lens of contemporary women readers

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Abstract: The History of Literature has very well paved the road for the authors to express, analyse and be gender neutral without bearing the pressure of any stereotypes or encumbering the need to fit in the mould made by someone else to fit in the literary canon. The author Elaine Showalter in her work “Towards a Feminist Poetics” has explained how literature should evolve through the female reader’s point of view. She has divided women writers in three segments and emphasised on the last one. In this whole ordeal she has also coined the term “Gynocritics” which she advocates considering it as a major tool to understand the text of female authors more vividly and profoundly.

The use of literary theories such as Marxism, Structuralism are encrypted as not sufficient to decode the gentility or true sense of the text. Need of psychoanalytic approach is required to understand the concept.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Marxism, Structuralism, Gynocritics, Psychoanalysis.

Elucidation: Elaine Showalter is an American feminist, author and the first person to bring the concept of feminist criticism in the United States. In her text “ Towards a Feminist Poetics “ she has tutored the reader to understand the need to read the female authors in order to value their voice and individuality without falling back on the male authors trajectory. She has dealt with the female writers of the Victorian period (1837-1901), this period is also called as the golden age of literature since it started reflecting the daily life and ideologies of people, their morals and topics like love, faith, justice and also to some extent equality.

This era was also known as the Age of reading and the Age of periodicals. The focus in terms of female authors was more in theory or practice exclusively from the eyes of her excluding the terminologies used by the male authors.

Showalter accentuated more on creating a clear division between the female authors of the respective age to bring out clear and unclouded picture of the evolution in literature and how it should shape further in order to fulfil the agenda of female authors writing and differentiate it with their male counterparts not in vengeance or hatred but only for the outcome of truthful literature.

Elaine Showalter has defined two types of feminist critics:

- Women as readers or consumers of male produced literature initiating their cerebrum to think or presume accordingly.
- Women as authors who awaken the sexual codes in their texts and content.

She highlights that in the initial stage the female writing is very imitative because of the widespread acceptance of the ideas from the dominant culture.

She divides the literature of female authors in three prominent categories:

Phase of Imitation: This phase is called as the feminine phase (1840-1880). She names authors like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and her sisters, George Eliot which was the pseudo name of Mary Anne Evans and many more.

The feminine phase focused on the women characters according to the preconceived notion of the consumers so as to let the text sail through without much rejection or ruckus. In this phase the women authors were writing to be read and accepted more than to follow their consciousness and evoke the fragrance of reality which was far beyond the portrayal.

Phase of Protest: This phase was also called the Phase (1880-1920) where women were more rebellious and the focus was on the negation of the male authority, values and the standards in sorority with the mentality to achieve their individual freedom and autonomy.

Phase of self-realisation: It is also called as the Female Phase (1920 till date). It relies on the true meaning of literature and its aspects where the soul aim is self-discovery and search of one's own identity.

The finest term used for this phase is "The New Age of Self Awareness". This phase showed that imitation and protest both are form of dependence .

The division made the female readers to realise the actual exploitation and manipulation of the audience where the whole psychodynamics of female creativity was consumed by the conflict created in the minds of the readers as well as authors.

Since the number of male authors were far more than female authors the remuneration created a shift towards their ideologies but then came a time where the cloud of inequality in literature became inevitable to at least show the reality on papers to provoke the thoughts of the other gender. It was demanded for the female authors to produce textual meaning, history, themes, genres, structure and literature which is true to their lives and important for their female camaraderie. Feminist critique was basically more of political and polemical as said by Showalter.

It was male oriented and also more of a strong critical attack or a controversial opinion for something with theoretical affiliation to the Marxist sociology. In Marxist literary criticism, literary works are portrayed as a mirror image of the social infrastructure from the point of their origination. In fact, the work itself is considered as a social institution that has a specific ideological function based on the ideology, thought process and the background of the writer.

She ardently supported the concept of “Gynocriticism” that aims at analyzing women’s literature that is based on women’s own personal experiences. Thus, the idea that Gynocritics invokes includes formation of a frame-work that could assess women’s literature and development of a new models deriving its basis from female experience. Showalter realizes that Gynocritics arise when the dependence on male literary tradition is discarded

Victimisation and the weak visualisation of women was so naturalised that it became the obsessive topic of discussion. The so-called feminist critic was bothered by the incompetence of women rather than their ferocious mental ability and tenacity to take over any pedestal.

In her text “Towards the Female Poetics” Showalter has also mentioned two-tiered criticism:

- Higher Criticism: It emphasizes on the scientific form and structure of the text.
- Lower Criticism: The main attention in such criticism in on the humanistic problems of content and interpretation.

Showalter also said the authors should stop trying to fit women in between the lines of male tradition and focus more on the female culture and ethnicities.

Even J.S. Mill one of the eminent male feminist critic wrote about it in his text “Emancipate itself from the influence of accepted models” in 1869.

Conclusion: The contemporary women readers as well as authors should try to find the answers of the repressed questions in the fields of Anthropology, history, psychology and dig into the past to perceive the early feminists as they truly should be. Marxism and Structuralism strive more in New Criticism practiced by women.

We need to read the literature with Individual Consciousness and keep an open mind for the odds and evens both that are discerned as obscene, unethical, invalid or against traditional norms and ideas. Showalter has also highlighted the fact that much women literature in the past has dealt with “Matrophobia” or fear of becoming ones mother since in the fifties and sixties hating ones mother was a feministic enlightenment and a metaphor for hating oneself in terms of imagining the oppressed and regressive life devoid of equal opportunities to be their own future.

Thus, Elaine Showalter has tailored the roadmap for women authors as well as the readers to find their own voice and trust their personal intuition more than the traditional norm continuity to make literature more indubitable, pragmatical and unidealistically true.

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