ELAINE SHOWALTER: MODELS AND DIMENSIONS OF GYNOCENTRIC
FEMINIST CRITICISM

Dr. Munir
Associate Professor & Head
Post-Graduate Dept. of English & Research Centre
Shibli National College
Azamgarh (U P) India

INTRODUCTION
The paper based on Showalter’s seminal essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” investigates the models and dimensions of her gynocentric-feminist criticism. At the outset, as she starts to make her study, she finds that feminist criticism is in a deplorable condition. The entire feminist critical landscape is clouded with numerous ideologies and strategies contradicting each other arriving at without any well-defined manifesto and assumptions, and lacking a clear-cut vision. She observes that “it has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm” (1981:180) and pictures the bewildering variety of ideologies, methodologies, and perspectives. Showalter quotes Annette Kolodny’s statement that feminist criticism looks like “more like a set of interchangeable strategies than any coherent school or shared goal orientation” (1981:180). She further experiences that “there is no Mother of Feminist Criticism” (1984: 29-43). It is purely of political and polemical nature—attacking male and defending female criticism respectively. In addition to this, there are various streams of feminism—Liberal Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Radical Feminism, and Marxist Feminism. There are as many types of feminist criticism as many feminists. Black critics also raise their voice against the disregard and indifference of feminist criticism about the black and the Third World women writers and demand a black aesthetic concentrating on both racial and sexual politics. Each section of feminism was so deeply preoccupied with asserting
their demands that they were unaware of what was being written by the writers of their time. Indulged in accusations and blames to androcentric hegemony, feminist theory welters in myriad of ideologies and methodologies—Marxism, Freudianism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstructionism among others. Feminism was spilling over in all possible directions and flirting with all schools of thought imaginable. Showalter discovers that the American feminist critics, who dot not to be left out of anything happening around them, active in the multiple and loose structured enterprise. In other words, feminist criticism was shrouded in chaos, obscurity, and misdirection and struggling “to attain theoretical respectability” (Barry 123). Showalter confronts with two basic problems—first, there is no tradition of women’s writing, and secondly, there is no female framework to establish feminist criticism.

**ANDROCENTRICISM:**

Showalter, a seriously dedicated and organized feminist critic, appears with her coherent and clear-cut vision on the American critical landscape to formulate a unified feminist criticism. Though she is herself very critical and caustic to its ailing condition, yet she is also aware that woman writers are getting conscious of their intellectual strength, their sexual identity, and their creativity. But despite all, feminist criticism, as she experiences, is in a very sad state of affairs even in the 1980s and undergoes various charges. According to her, there are two main factors responsible for such chaotic condition. First, feminist criticism could not grow firm root in academic terrain, because it fails to invite a serious attention of the male counterparts and secondly, “the plight of women writers drew little attention” (Bertens 2001:94). As we read carefully the opening paragraphs of Showalter’s “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” we come to know that the psychology and mind-set of men towards women still remain unchanged even in the postmodern era, despite all claims of human advancements. They are considered incapable of intellectual activities and are unable to propound any genuine theory. The androcentric system and gesture reveal that creativity is only a male activity. Feminist critics get convinced that literature and literary criticism are in hands of male hegemony and, therefore, become a victim of prejudiced and sexist patriarchal system.

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Tyson Lois holds that Feminist criticism is concerned with the exclusion of women because the views of women authors are often not considered to be universal (2006:107).

**FEMALE TRADITION**

Prior to the discussion of how women’s work would be different and special in her different gynocentric models, Showalter studies their literature from historical perspective to establish a tradition of women novelists, poets, and dramatists, whose work has been forgotten and undervalued in the course of time. She claims that like male writers, female writers also have their own tradition. Revealing the wrong method of reading women writers, she exposes that they have so far been read in isolation without having any connection and influence of one writer with the other. Showalter points out that although women writers since the beginning have shared a hidden solidarity with other women writers, yet there was no expressive communality or self-awareness before the 1840s. Approaching women’s literature with more historical and holistic awareness, Showalter makes a survey of a chain of women writers to reconstruct, rediscover, and recreate their work to determine the continuity of female tradition decade wise. Recalling, T.S. Eliot’s tradition of literary tradition, she selects one hundred and fifty women novelists to demonstrate patterns and phases in the evolution of female tradition and points out how women’s work is different and special in the evolutionary phase of female cultural art, challenging the literary history and canons of male culture.

**THE FEMININE PHASE**

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter traces the historical development of women’s literature, dividing the whole development of female imagination into three different phases—the Feminine, the Feminist, and the Female (1977: 13). In the Feminine Phase, dating from 1840 to the death of George Eliot in 1880, Showalter notes that women writers in this phase usually did not enter into debate regarding women’s place in society. They made certain imitation of prevalent male models, male norms, and male values in their writing.
Assimilating male aesthetic standards, they identified themselves with male culture and cherished a passion to become like male writers and intellectuals. But women writers during this period were discouraged and denied to write and become writers. Out of fear and social compulsion, they would write after the male pen name as George Eliot or took their husband’s name as Mrs. Gaskell. It was the national characteristic of English women. They themselves founded phallocentric notions in the foreground. They not only hold male names but also identified themselves with father who occupies a central place in their writing.

**THE FEMINIST PHASE**

With the death of George Eliot in 1880, feminine aesthetics came to an end, and marked the beginning of the ideology of the feminist phase. During this phase, spanning from 1880 to 1920, political consciousness dawns upon women and they adopt a radical and separatist position making an entry into political field. They protest against the depiction of distorted and stereotyped pictures of women in male writing. Rejecting compromising and adjusting attitude, they handled literature as a tool of the expression of women’s pain, suffering and oppression. Their writing is characterized by resistance, anger, and cry for emancipation, revolting against male standards, male values, and male chauvinistic canons and biases, and male culture. Challenging patriarchal order, women advocate their right, vote, and values, including a demand for autonomy. The women also protested against “male government, male laws, and male medicine” (Showalter 1995:138). Their submissive, unresisting, and feminine gestures turned into volatile, resentful, and threatening temper to the system and injustice of patriarchy. In fact, “the feminists were putting teeth in the vagina” (Showalter 1977:185). It was the phase of awakening, protest, demonstration, assertion, and social tumult, and lays force on the strengthening of women’s position. It denoted political involvement, questioned the stereotypes of women, challenged the restrictions of women’s language, denounced the morality of self-sacrifice, endurance, and patience, and used their fictional dramatization of “the ordeals of wronged womanhood” (Showalter 1995:138) and subjugation to bring social and political changes in the west. They embodied a declaration of

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independence in the female tradition and rebelled against the male establishment in an unbridled way. In their mission, they encountered a strong opposition, but at the same time drew support from some of the male feminists.

THE FEMALE PHASE
The Female Phase, covering from 1920 to the present day, is a phase of fearless self-exploration, a phase of a search for identity of woman, a phase of repugnance to the imitation of the feminine writers and the protest of the feminist writers. Showalter states: “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 technique of literature” (Showalter 1995:139). Steeped in the spirit of their own potentiality and discovery, the women writers of this phase cherish complete freedom and autonomy of expression of the female experience in their writing, and like the true female observers, they pay an attention to more realistic modes of expression without any inhibitions. It should be noted that there is a difference between female literature and works written by women. In *Literature of Their Own*, Showalter points out that female literature is completely based on the expression of women’s feelings, emotions, and experiences without any inhibition and fear. On the other hand, works written by women do not express women’s experience freely, rather they internalize male assumptions in their writing. The consciousness of women writers prevents them from representing their personal experiences. Women’s writing may or may not reveal women’s feelings, but female writing is especially used for the expression of women’s feelings and experiences.

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE
Having established a tradition of women’s literature, making a historical survey from the nineteenth century to the present, Showalter focuses her attention to the existing condition of feminist critical discourse. She discovers that feminist criticism falls into two different categories—the feminist critique or feminist reading and gynocentricism. The first type of

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feminist criticism is ideological and deals with woman as reader, where women are only the consumers of the literary writing produced by male writers. Showalter defines that the feminist critique

...is a historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history (1995: 128).

The main aim of the feminist critique is to depict how the image of women is presented in male produced literature. That is why, the feminist critique is also called the Images of women criticism. Such feminist critics direct their attention to the historical, cultural, and social background that has been the cause of stereotypes of women in male texts. Even the fantasies of the male critic distort the text. Though the feminist critique is male-oriented and points out the sexism of male critics and the limited roles women play in literary history, yet its advantage is that it opens entirely a new perspective of reading male texts. The significance of this feminist theoretical discourse is that it changes the complete outlook and understanding towards the entire body of existing male writing, because it exposes how unpleasant, oppressed, and twisted images of women are portrayed to exploit, subjugate, and control them like a puppet since ages. It gives a new perception to literature, which has never been read in his manner, and paves a new way of analyzing texts, rejecting the traditional accepted ways. The feminist critique also brings an awareness and consciousness in women as to how women are tamed and asked to behave in particular ways on the ground of sexual difference; how big gaps between man and women are maintained, how women are neglected and marginalized in male constructed history. The feminist critique historically explores how women are mentally, physically, and socially colonized in male texts. They are pictured as passive, submissive, and what men wanted them to be. In this way, the whole literary output of male writers comes under scrutiny and review, and needs interpretation from revisionist perspective, revealing wrong beliefs and ideas cherished for women. It is “a liberating
intellectual act” and “invigorating encounter with literature.” According to Showalter, feminist critique is also concerned with the exploitation and the manipulation of the female audience, especially in films and popular culture. In commercial advertisements, women appear in different poses exposing part of their body to get more publicity to various consumer products.

Showalter expresses her concern that the other aspect of the feminist critique is also that it is essentially political and polemical having affiliations and reliance on to male-made theories such as Marxism. Showalter is suspicious of feminist critique teaches women to read like men and thereby distort female experiences. Showalter is not fully satisfied with the performance of the feminist critique, because it does not fulfill the main aim and hopes of feminist criticism. She undoubtedly appreciates the role of the feminist reading, adopting a revisionist approach to reveal the exploitation, injustice, and misogyny done to women.

Though it has been very influential, yet “a tentative beginning in the development of a feminist literary aesthetic” (Holly: 1975, 46). Showalter intends to go beyond this interpretation and learn what men have felt and thought about women. Now it becomes essential for feminist to start constructing a female-oriented literary criticism. She recommends a new type of feminist criticism i.e. gynocentricism. She thinks it more important than the feminist reading.

**GYNOCRITICISM**

The second type or mode of feminist criticism is gynocentricism based on the concept of woman as a writer. It is a women-centric approach to literary criticism, dealing with the subjects of female creativity, female language, female literary history, and studies of particular female writers and works. It is simply the celebration of women’s writing. In her “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” Showalter defines that gynocentricism:
... is the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. (1981:184-185).

Gynocentricism has two important aims: the first is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature; the second is to develop new models or schools, which depend on the female experience. The departure point of gynocentricism is feminists’ freedom from the impact of male literary history. Showalter is calling for a female autonomy which depicts women’s own experiences and feelings. Gynocentricism is more self-contained and experimental. Liberating from the obsession of male literature, male literary history, and the history of male literary criticism, it rejects to conform to male models, rules, and theories, and constructs a female framework for the interpretation of women’s literature to develop new models rooted in the study of female experience. Woman as writer establishes a tradition of history, themes, genres, structures, and features of women’s literature. Gynocentricism proclaims to break with the so called complete perfect or sacrosanct writing of male literary history, without being fillers in the male tradition. In “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” Showalter explains if women continue to study stereotypes of women, sexism in male authored literary criticism, and limitations of women’s role in literary history, it will only repeat and re-imprint the female inequalities. Therefore, gynocentricism sets its focus on female subjectivity, female language, and female careers, and the lived experience of female writers, readers, and subjects. In this way, many forgotten female writers will be brought out into lime light and the horizons of the newly visible world of female culture will dawn with a great hope and promise in the new coming era.

In her *The Female Imagination* (1975), Patricia Meyer Spacks, the first academic feminist critic, notices a marked tradition of critical discourse concerned with women’s writing in some of the feminist theorists. Notable among them are Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking about Women*, Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, etc. Spacks
inaugurates a new era of feminist literary history and criticism frequently asking as to how women’s writing is different and how womanhood itself shapes women’s creative expression. Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women* (1976), Showalter’s *A Literature Their Own* (1977) Nina Baym’s *Woman’s Fiction* (1978), Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Margaret Homans’s *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980) are gynocentric studies.

This marked change is also seen in European especially in French feminist critical discourse. French feminist criticism without having any inclination towards American empirical orientation is mainly theoretical, related with the theories of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Darida, and Michel Foucault etc. but despite these differences, both American and French feminists keep in tune and move forward to achieve their mission. Helene Cixous, one of the pioneers of French feminist criticism, develops a French concept *écriture feminine*, meaning women’s writing. It defines that women’s writing highlights female body and feminine value and this expression makes female difference from male experience. Cixous argues that there is not much writing that inscribes femininity. Nancy Miller explains that the focus of *écriture feminine* is to establish female texuality. Julia Kristeva, Cixous, and Luce Irigaray in *New French Feminism*, have made a brilliant exposition of *écriture feminine*.

There is an immense scope and dimension of gynocentricism. It can be applied to any branch of discipline to open up a new vista of knowledge women’s perspective. Gynocentricism lends voice and velocity to the dumb and silent women of the society—almost half of the society. It is never confined to literary criticism, but also encourages women to make feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. These disciplines propound hypotheses of female subculture; discussing newly achieved status of women, their internalized constructs of femininity, their occupations, interactions, and consciousness. Anthropologists study the female subculture in the relationship between women as mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends; in sexuality, reproduction, and ideas about the body; and in rites of initiation and passage, purification, ceremonies, myths and taboos. Showalter enlists
a number of studies made on women in anthropology and social sciences diligently to point out that there is a dire need of creating a history of literary studies based on English women. In fact, Showalter discovers that in some of women’s writing, feminine values are so sharp and pointed that they undervalue the male systems that contain them. They have imaginatively engaged with the myths of the Amazons and the fantasies of a separate female society.

Gynocentrism differs from feminist criticism in numerous ways. It has a positive approach to focus on female writers, their works, and characteristics of their works. It examines female’s life from female’s point of view and expresses a distinctive female consciousness, wishes, desires, and their attitudes towards life. It is more self-contained and experimental with connections to other modes of new feminist research. The gynocritic world is increasing as it looks into the specificity of women’s writing which is on the ever-expanding universal.

The very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and work (Rosaldo:1974, 39).

It should be also kept in our mind that it will be injustice to evaluate the feminist critique as less important than gynocentrism. Both have their own importance in their own ways. If gynocentrism initiates to establish a framework for feminist criticism, the feminist critique is an eye-opener to interpret the male text from women perspective. This kind of criticism prepares grounding for feminist criticism exposing andocentricism. In this way, for the first time, men and women think literature in different terms. Gomez aptly writes that feminist reading is “a mode of literary analysis which tries to reinterpret from woman’s point of view and introduces the notion of sexual differentiation into the study of literature” (Gomez: 1991, 85). It is also important to know that gynocentrism does not mean to stop men’s writing completely. We know very well how feminists fought to include women writings into the literary canon. But is the process of including is enough? Or do feminists need to analyze the texts exactly as they did with men’s writings. And this is simply what Showalter demands.
BIOLOGICAL OR ORGANIC CRITICISM

As far as gynocriticism is concerned, it analyses women’s texts from different angles and offers many theoretical opportunities and ramifications. Among them, Showalter discusses four schools of gynocentric feminist criticism, formulating in her different terminologies. They are biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical, and cultural criticism. Showalter makes an attempt to define and differentiate the qualities of women’s writing from men’s on the basis of these four models, though some of them overlap with one another. First, biological or organic criticism is one of the schools of gynocentric feminist criticism, dealing with the relationship between women’s writing and women’s body. It makes a clear demarcation and difference of sexual identity—the clear-cut explanation of sex difference. It reveals that a text is always stamped with a permanent mark of the body. Showalter states that “anatomy is textuality.” It is the biological criticism that completely separates women’s writing from men’s and determines the nature of the text.

It is in the differentiation of the sexes that we learn our earliest and deepest lessons about sameness and difference. Sexual differentiation is the basis, not only in our social system but of our logic as well. If there were three sexes, our computers would not have begun to think in terms of binary opposition (Scholer: 1971, 197).

However, to understand biological criticism, it is essential to have knowledge about the concept of woman in western culture. In the western culture, down the ages, the concept of woman and her body is inscribed in a negative and frustrating gesture. Western scholars, philosophers, and anthropologists make difference between man and woman on the ground of separate and distinct physiological structures. Women’s physical phenomena such as pregnancy, child birth, lactation, menstruation are natural characteristics. Men’s physiology contrarily is different from the delicate body of women. Men’s features like beards, moustaches, strong muscles, and penis justify their domination over female. On the basis of this sexual and biological difference, women are considered weak and inferior to men in

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both critical and creative faculties, and thus they (women) need men’s protection and patronage and exclusive social roles are assigned to them. Similarly, various other masculine assumptions, attitudes, constructions, and manipulated structures are devised and justified for the exploitation and domination of woman. Showalter explains that “Victorian physicians believed that women’s physiological functions diverted about twenty percent of their creative energy from brain activity. Victorian anthropologists believed that the frontal lobes of the male brain were heavier and more developed than female lobes and thus that women were inferior in intelligence” (187). Most of the male critics also believe that women are born with lesser developed cognitive organs and they are lower in intelligence. Therefore, women cannot write successfully; if they write, they produce spurious literature and exhibits their anxiety or lack of power to create literature because of their biological differentiation. In this connection Spacks argues: “So what is a woman to do, setting out to write about women? She can imitate men in her writings, or strive for impersonality beyond sex, but finally she must write as a woman” (33).

Feminist criticism rejects the flat notion of female biological inferiority, and men’s superiority over women. Catherine Stimpson argues:

Cultural laws of gender demand that feminine and masculine must play off against each other in the great drama of binary opposition.... In patriarchal cultural, the struggle must end in the victory of the masculine; complementarily must arrange itself hierarchically; androgyny must be a mythic fiction (1).

Feminist critics reject biological determinism and claim that gender is socially constructed. In the 1970s, sex differences were used to argue that women should not become airline pilot since they will be hormonally unstable once a month and, therefore, unable to perform their duties as well as men (Rogers: 1966, 11). However, some of the feminists accept, by and large, biological difference but not in abilities and aptitudes. They emphasize that it is this biological difference which makes female different from male emotionally and

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psychologically, which is reflected in their writing, too. In this regard, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, these two feminists very seriously examine women’s writing in terms of literary paternity. They maintain that traditional western culture believes that male is the creator, progenitor, procreator, and father of the text, because the generative instrument of power is pen, which is compared to his penis (6). Whereas women do not possess the phallic power, and, therefore, their writing deeply echoes the anxieties of this difference. Gilbert and Gubar further raise question from what organ then females can create text, while males do from pen-penis. They maintain silence over this issue and fail to respond to their own question.

However, Showalter and other feminists strongly oppose the analogy of literary paternity. They conversely hold that women generate texts from metaphorical womb. Nina Auerbach blames that literary paternity ignores literary maternity. The relationship between literary creativity and childbirth is more adequate and infallible (qtd.188). Showalter points out that “the process of literary creation is analogically much more similar to gestation, labor, and delivery than it is to insemination” (188). The process of childbirth by a woman is more important than sowing seed or semen of man in the womb of a woman. In other words, for feminist critics to write means to give birth. They offer arguments that the process of female creativity is even more timeless and oppressive than that of male creativity. It is more logical and convincing. Thus, feminist critics relate metaphors of creativity to literary maternity, which was very much predominant in the writing of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Since ages, women have been unaware of the importance, meaning, value, dignity, and beauty of their own bodies, because various cynical male assumptions were operating on female biology. Trapped in social taboos, personal inhibitions, and inferiority complex, they could never realize the worth of female biology. They suffer from inferiority complex because of their breasts encased in bra, vagina wrapped with pad, and a ‘lack’ of penis as Sigmund Freud theorizes ‘castration complex’. This eternal obsession rooted in their mind generates a kind of anxiety and ignominy and prevents them from leading a free and full human life.
Gynocritics suggest that women should not hold these philological phenomena in a negative and degrading way; rather they are the natural course of women’s life and womanhood. They should enjoy every bit of women’s experiences and the vibrancy of their physicality, maintaining a complete harmony of physical, psychological, and emotional unity. In this way, the concept of woman’s physiology undergoes a radical change in the hands of feminist critics. They consider it an asset which men are deprived of. Women should be proud to become women and have full right over their body and their experiences are fulfilling, enriching, and satisfying. They challenge and believe that women are more naturally mothers and home makers. Some of the radical feminists of France and America redefine female biology very seriously and think sexual differentiation in a positive way. They suggest to women to celebrate, appreciate, and emphasize their female anatomy with full freedom without any psychological trammel so that they could live life freely and happily. Women should experience, feel, and think of their own potentiality, since their biology is neither a frailty nor a destiny nor a matter of shame. It is a sign of great boon—a sign of resource, a source of immense energy, and power. Therefore, women should have full intelligence of their own physicality—its unity and emotional effect. Adrienne Rich very appropriately contends that:

Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life, we require not only control of our bodies... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence (62).

Feminist critics argue that with such advantages, women’s writing proceeds from the body; and their sexual difference is a source of creativity. They highlight that female body is also a source of imagery. Alicia Ostriker argues that most of the contemporary American poets celebrate female body and introduce anatomical imagery more frankly and widely than their
male counterparts. They refuse to talk of female flesh in terms of spiritual or emotional state, but acknowledge and praise female body on the corporal ground. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson present physical nudity in their writing, but both in different ways. Dickinson’s naked imagery is objectified or reveals nakedness as to how a female body is sexually exploited, whereas for Whitman and other male poets, it is a potent poetic symbol for authenticity.

The most visible difference between men and women is indeed the difference in body. It is, therefore, quite obvious that women’s emotional and psychological experiences are different from their male counterparts. Showalter argues that feminist criticism which itself is based on the glorification of female physiology is a product of female body. It has been characterized by a sense of intimacy, confession, and innovation in style and form. Feminist critics pour out their tender feelings, amazing thoughts, intimate experiences, and various nuances of emotions from the innermost part of the psyche and confide them in their writing so far denied to them by males. They express their feelings and thoughts of what happens when they undergo hormonal changes, developing of their breasts, beginning of menstrual cycle, feelings of love-making, conception, gestation, labor pain, delivery, motherhood, breast feeding, rearing, nursing, and nurturing of a baby. But such criticism has to face and fight tirelessly for its survival because the professional powerful male-structured taboos strongly oppose such female revelation. But once feminist criticism breaks male prescriptive restrictions and occupies a permanent place, it can express those dark and mute areas which were untouched and unrevealed. And after that such criticism “achieves the power and the dignity of art.” Its existence becomes a model and a lesson to those critics who avoid expressing their intimate feelings and focus their attention on “outside their female bodies.” So, gynocentric biological criticism rejects female physiological inferiority in women’s writing and expresses those fascinating feelings and phenomenal livings which are absent in male writing. Women’s biological difference is women’s strength, source, resource, creativity, and imagery. They have their own unique identity. Biological criticism believes that anatomical
differentiation is fundamental to understand how women see themselves in relation to society. It is also instrumental to understand how they represent themselves in writing.

Gynocentric feminist criticism based on the model of biological factor presents one of the most baffling theoretical formulations. Showalter expresses her worry that mere frank and indiscriminate description of anatomical imagery may degenerate into a texture of superficiality and lead to other two types of theories of art—the phallic and the ovarian. She suggests that feminist critics should refrain from the method of crude essentialism. Sheer gross and naked portrayal of anatomical imagery disregarding social, ideological, and intellectual implications is meaningless. It is called biocriticism, instead of being biological criticism. Notable its practitioners are Elizabeth Hardwick and Suasn Sontag, whose *Seduction and Betrayal* and *Illness as Metaphor* respectively appear to be barren and strained. Showalter, therefore, warns of any obsession of the exhibition of female physicality, and woman should not expose her body at the centre, while searching for her female identity. Manifestation of body without any relevance to linguistic, social, and literary implications is of no value. Basic problems and predicament of women, the themes of otherness, and the delineation of the body should merge together. The study of biological imagery is significant and beneficial when it is related to other factors of understanding as to how women conceptualize their situation in society. Miller aptly writes that the difference of women’s literary practice must be explored in “the body of her writing and not the writing of her body” (190).

**LINGUISTIC CRITICISM**

Gynocentric feminist criticism based on linguistic model is one of the most exciting areas. It tries to raise the issue whether men and women use the same language or different. Of course, it is the androcentric society that determines women’s use of language as to what and how they should speak. Men have laid down norms and rules for women’s language. Nelly Fiman remarks: “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 world around us”
In their speech and writing, women cannot use the same language as men do. Women’s “essence of expression” is stripped off and they are thrown into the dark cell of silence. Robin Lakoff aptly suggest that women’s language is a product of early childhood. Parents and other authority figures encourage little girls to adopt a gender specific way of speaking which displays their femininity linguistically in the same way that wearing frilly dresses, playing with dolls, ‘throwing like a girl’ and avoiding ‘rough’ play displays (our culture’s norm of) femininity physically. And this femininity is not just. It a symbolic enactment of powerlessness: about taking up less space, making fewer demands, appearing weaker, and less aggressive than boys. If we look at from Foucauldian perspective, this discourse is created my man who is powerful and controls women’s use of language in their speech as well as writing. K. K. Ruthven in “Constructing Feminist Theories of Criticism” suggests that women should struggle to speak and write in their own idiom without accepting androcentric interference. She holds:

She would be able to speak her own meanings and experiences, provided she was able to communicate in a language free from patriarchal interference. But ‘woman’ is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, a dispersed subject, historically variable, socially feminized and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted (45).

It is true that all differences, which are noticed in biological, social, and cultural aspects, are finally rooted in language. Feminist critics dwell upon the practical problems of women’s use of language—the specificity of ‘women’s language,’ which is constructed my men. They seriously debate that women’s use of language is quite different from that of men in both speech and writing.

Women are the blanks and holes in communication, what is unspoken, solidified into gesture, silence or nonsense. On the level of theory then, as well as of social structures, women are excluded from the literary scene. If they are...
to enter it, they must make their difference a subject, without opting for the principle of identity or oneness (Godard: 1987, 16).

Elaine Showalter offers the different views and opinions of at least eight feminist scholars to validate that women’s use of language is different from that of men. This difference in the use of language imposed upon them is also a method of phallocentric hegemony to dominate them. That is why Virginia Woolf also expresses her view: “A woman’s writing is always feminine, at its best it is most feminine, the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine” (Woolf: 1977, 164). Adrienne Rich considers male’s language as “oppressor’s language,” as “sexist” language, as “abstract” language. Nelly Furman explains that whatever women do, think, see, and understand i.e. their entire vision and perceptions of reality are subtly and intricately shaped and controlled by male-structured language, which is also one of the tools of female exploitation. They are not allowed to use the same kind of language as men use. Thus, the very nature of the phallocentric discourse shows the conspiring gesture of the dominant masculine ideology. According to Carolyn Burk, “when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign language, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable” (qtd. 191).

Some of the revolutionary French feminists take deep interest in oral language and invoke women to liberate themselves from the “dictatorship of patriarchal speech.” Annie Leclere advises women to explore a language which should be neither oppressive nor keeps under restraint, but it should give them full freedom to speak (qtd. 191). Chantal Chawaf is of the opinion: “Feminine language must, by its very nature, work on life passionately, scientifically, poetically, politically in order to make it invulnerable” (191). Xavier Gauthier and other feminists hold that women should neither speak as men do nor remain silent. In both ways, they will be marginalized, mute, and alienated in historical process. Now the third option is left to throw male-dominated speech into disorder. This would subvert the androcentric construction of language.

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Showalter argues that the concept of women’s use of language in feminist criticism is nothing new or original. In the ancient times, it frequently appears in folklore, myth, and ecstatic religions. Since ages anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural scholars have been keenly interested in the use of women’s language. Herodotus, for example, offers that Amazons were able linguists who easily mastered the languages of their male antagonists. Later Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* discloses that women’s language existed in matriarchal stage. After a great battle of the sexes, the matriarch was overthrown and the women’s language went underground. Showalter holds that in certain cultures women had developed their personal and secret form of language for their own purpose to oppose the silence imposed upon them in public life. This form of language was not shared by men.

Interestingly, Showalter compares the position of a feminist language and the language of a newly independent colonial country. After independence, the decolonized country has an option to choose one of the languages, which is supposed to be suitable, easy, intimate, wide-ranging, and closer to the identity of the natives’ country. It is politically viable, but so far as women’s use of language is concerned, a number of problems crops up. Women cannot create or evolve any language to their own personal need and identity based on her gender. Robin Lakoff is of the view that the problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied complete usage of language and therefore they express themselves best through silence, gaps, euphemisms, and circumlocution. All English and American linguists unanimously agree that there is no evidence of linguistic system which is made for male and female differently. Of course, the difference in tone, intonation, speech, and language use are identified, but they are not on the basis of “two separate sex-specific language.” The difference is because of styles, strategies, and contexts of linguistic performance. Mary Hiatt’s computerized book *The Way Women Write* (1977) written on this area becomes a piece of severe criticism. But gynocritics like Mary Jacobus offer an option that women should try to “modify language and write within the male discourse...ceaselessly deconstructing language to write what cannot be written” (12-13).
Regarding linguistic criticism, Showalter concretizes her opinion that women should be given space and complete freedom to use the full resources of language. There should not be any boundary line between men and women so far the use of language is concerned. In this way, women writers will be able to express their consciousness, their feelings, and their experiences as men do. Cixous also believes: “Women must write herself and bring women to writing, from which they have driven away as violently as from their bodies” (334). The restriction that women cannot use the language which men do is a great injustice to them. They are forced to be either mute or speak and write in round about ways. That is why, women’s literature is still a victim of repressed language. Showalter suggests that women overcoming this stumbling block must expand the scope of the use of language. It is not only men’s heritage or monopoly that men can use and women cannot. Equal access and opportunity to the use of language should be given to women. Their language should not be oppressive, otherwise they will have to “Reinvent language... to speak not only against but outside the secular phallocentric structure to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning” (Felman:1975,10). Once they succeed, they could express their body and mind without any psychological inhibitions and produce qualitative women’s literature. Virginia Woolf sharply comments against the censorship which cuts off female access to language. If they remain silent and do not loosen their tongue, they will be “the invisible and unheard sex” (Jones, 200).

**Psychoanalytical Criticism**

Third issue of gynocritics is psychoanalytic feminist criticism that deals with the relationship between the creative process and the author’s psyche in relation to gender. The difference in creative process in case of male and female is studied on the basis of this connection. Female psyche is shaped by the body, the development of different language use, and sex-role socialization. Various psychological theories are androcentric and point out that female is inferior in terms of creative potentialities. Gynocritics frown upon Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, condemning them as the source of patriarchal attitude. They reject Freud’s

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biological determinism and fight relentlessly against his theory of psychosexual development and review it in terms of gynecocentrism. Freud’s psychoanalytical theory is focused on the absent of phallus (penis) in female body. According to Freud, woman’s psyche is determined and defined through penis envy, castration complex, and the phallic or oedipal stage. These Freudian coordinates explain the meaning of women’s personality or psyche and declares that women are inferior, weak, and passive to men because they ‘lack’ penis. They are sex objects to men’s desires. A male is gifted with penis, whereas a woman lacks it; she is a negative entity. This negativity and a lack of penis is very well reflected in the form of anxiety in art and literature.

Psychoanalytical feminist criticism based on Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis has perpetually been struggling with the feminine disadvantage and lack. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Guber, accepting Harold Bloom’s oedipal model, present women artist as displaced, disinherited, and excluded in the continual history of fight between fathers and sons. They further clarify that female identity suffers from trouble and torment because of her own gender. Her gender is “a painful obstacle” or even weak and inadequate, which leaves a tremendous negative impression on her personality. This gender crisis generates frustration and a sense of inferiority complex in her psyche, which results in women’s writing of the nineteenth century in the form of their sickness, their loneliness, their isolation, their madness, and their paralysis. Though Gilbert and Guber underline these characteristics of the nineteenth century woman writing, yet they (the characteristics) can be a general thesis. Thus, the nature of her writing is marked by difference from male writing.

Most of the feminist critics sharply react and reject Freud, because they are ever troubled with the genderist attitude of his phallic theory. They have been trying to establish new principles of feminist psychoanalysis in search of the nature of female psychosexual identity, which would try to differentiate gender identities rather than Freudian theories. Kate Miller in her essay “Emphasis Added” poses the problem of negativity of female identity in psychoanalytic criticism. She tries to show the strategies of how female identity is determined
in relation to phallocentric model only to justify that women are inferior to men. That is why, the criticism of women’s texts has frequently been unfair and unjustified. In “The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming,” Freud maintains that the unjustified dreams and desires of women are mainly erotic and shape the plots of women’s fiction. On the other hand, men’s dreams and desire in the plots are egoistic and ambitious as well as erotic. Miller strongly deconstructs these assumptions of Freud and argues that gynecocentric reading reveals that a repressed egoistic and ambitious fantasy is found in both texts—male and female.

In addition to Freudian psychoanalytic feminist criticism, some of the feminist critics such as Annis Pratt, Barbara Rigney, and Ann Douglas have produced independent works on the theory Jung, Erikson, and others. These critics, deconstructing the concept of Freudian disadvantage and lack, emphasize the development and construction of gender identities and female creativity in writing.

According to Showalter, one of the most important female psychoanalysts, Nancy Chodorow, adopts a positive and creative approach to female identity, which leaves an enormous effect on women’s studies and feminist literary criticism. In her promising book, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (1978), she takes quite a different proposition of the traditional Freudian concept of psychosexual differentiation. She rejects Freud’s concept of gender identity on the model of the oedipal phase and develops the theory of gender, sexual differentiation, and sexual preference, which start at the pre-oedipal stage. Nancy theorizes that while living in an immediate contact with the mother (the primary caretaker), the formation of sexual identity of children of both genders grows in different ways. For a boy, the mother is a woman, he learns his identity negatively as ‘not female,’ while a girl has a particularly easy, and positive growth built upon sameness, continuity, and identification with the mother. Woman’s difficulties with feminine identity come after the oedipal phase, when social constructions and powerful male cultural hegemony are imposed on her. Through her theory, Chodorow visualizes that if the responsibility of parenting is shared by both father and mother, it will definitely leave a deep
effect on the upbringing and gender identity of children. Keeping in view mother-daughter relationship which is supposed to be a source of female creativity by gynocritics, Godard suggests: “In order for women to grow into authentic individuals, they must explore their relationship with their mothers, and by extension, their place in the matrilineal literary tradition” (1987: 12). But psychoanalytical theory could not solve the dispute of the nature of androcentric and gynocentric creativity, because each claims superiority over another. Hence, Showalter adopts a more balanced attitude and holds that “we must go beyond the psychoanalysis to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women’s writing” (197).

Nancy Chodorow’s the sexual identity determined at the pre-Oedipal stage and the core positive gender identity leave a significant impact on the feminist literary criticism. This new type of feminist psychoanalysis takes interest into the mother-daughter configuration as a source of creativity. Chodorow applies this theory in the literary texts. Her investigation shows a common female friendship in the contemporary women’s novels. The study reveals not only the relationships of women characters but also the relationship of women writers. This female bonding in literature is determined by the female psychodynamics. In this connection, Elizabeth Abel has done a pioneering work in the collection of literary work of women from different nationalities to emphasize the constant and consistent development of certain “emotional dynamics in diverse cultural situations.” They share a common culture incorporating their attitudes and vision of the world. They form an idea of sisterhood that is the core characteristic of gynocritism. Cheri Register rightly remarks that the main motto of gynocriticism is “to provide sisterhood” (6). Here the unity of sisterhood stands for a symbol of rejection of the powerlessness that women felt because of the patriarchal structure of the society. The various female relationships between mother and daughter and many women writers themselves have been a source of female creativity. Critics like Abel have in this manner tried to create a separate psychological theory of female creativity based on the difference from male tradition of bondage or relationship.
CULTURAL CRITICISM

Showalter offers her argument that a feminist theory based on women’s culture is more holistic, comprehensive, and satisfactory than feminist theories based on biology, linguistics, and psychology about the distinction and differences of women’s writing. Feminist cultural theory has a broader and wider canvas because it embraces numerous other important factors and social conditions. Gynocentric models of biological, linguistic, and psychoanalytic criticism appear to be limited unless they are interpreted from socio-cultural perspectives.

All humans, particularly women, live in male-made socio-cultural environments which leave an indelible effect on them, conditioning their personalities. That is why, Dworkin argues:

The feminist project is to end male domination. In order to do this, we will have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, its art, its churches, its laws, its nuclear families based on father—right and notion—status, all of the images, institutions, customs and habits which define women as worthless and invisible victims (61-62).

Women’ activities, sexual and reproductive functions, conceptualization of bodies—all are intricately related to their cultural environments. Hence, “The female psyche can be studied as the product and construction of cultural forces” (197).

Feminist scholars have developed theoretical formulations to escape from masculine systems, hierarchies and values to establish the primacy and self-defined nature of female cultural experience. In her study, Gerda Lerner discusses that history is male-centered and it has excluded, neglected, and marginalized women and their activities. History is silent on the roles of women, because it has not included female experiences. History has thrown women into the theory of elimination. Thus, history is inadequate to understand women’s experience. Lerner calls for rectification and revaluation of history from women’s perspective. She argues that it is essential to write women-centered history to include an account of female experience and the development of feminist consciousness. There is a possibility of the existence of female culture within the general culture shared by men and
women. “This is the primary task of women’s history” (198). A new picture of history would emerge, if it is seen through the lens of women’s glass.

Showalter contends that women’s role is marginalized and ignored not only in history but also in the concepts of literary periodization—the Renaissance, a Romantic period, and a modernism. The discussion of the Renaissance is not the renaissance of women; in Romantic period, women played very little part; and in modernism women conflict. Male critics have found so far only “obscurities, evasions, implausibilities, and imperfections,” but gendered criticism presents a different map of literary history, which is also marked by the significant contributions of women writers. It shows that the eighteenth century “which has been regarded as a dead period, a dull blank” is in fact very important period from the perspective of women writers, who developed “the paradigm for women’s fiction of the nineteenth century” (1981:203). The female gothic, a popular genre of novel, which has also been suppressed and sidelined, got blossomed now and seen as part of the great tradition of the novel.

Historians define female culture that the roles of men and women are separate in society. Women have to follow social prescription laid down by males. There is border line or a demarcation in women’s life as to what they should and what they should not. They have been confined to certain roles, activities, tastes, and behaviors, which are acceptable, whereas certain things are forbidden. They have been delimited to a term “women’s sphere” by creating sexist ideology. The concept of “women’s sphere” is that women’s area of cultural experience is separate, and they have to think, feel, and do within that particular area. In other words, women’s culture and men’s culture are different, which are represented through two interesting circles. One of them is specific to women and the other is specific to men. Women theorists deconstruct male’s definition of women’s culture and redefines it from a women-centered point of view. Women’s culture refer to basic principles of equality, unity—“an awareness of sisterhood” and community oriented attitude to women. Women’s
Women’s culture rejects the subordination of women in the androcentric society. The gynocentric theory of culture is further discussed by two anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener. They construct a model of women’s culture. According to them, there are two groups—the muted group and the dominant group. The muted group belongs to women and the dominant to men. Ardener suggests a diagram with two circles representing these two groups respectively. The two circles stand for men’s and women’s culture but with the distinctiveness and difference represented by the crescent. Both men and women have these crescents standing for the wild zones. Both the crescents show the difference in the cultures of men and women spatially (a place where each culture is forbidden for the other), experimentally (aspects of lifestyle where no one can reach fully), and metaphorically (reflects unconscious mind). Women are aware of the unconscious aspects of men’s culture as through various legends and myths, it is put forwarded by men, but men cannot reach women’s unconscious as they have been forced to be invented. So, there are aspects of women’s culture completely inaccessible for men and totally incomprehensible too. One of the great advantages of women-culture model is that it shows how the female tradition can be a positive source of strength and solidarity as well as a negative source of powerlessness. It can generate its own experience and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition.

To conclude, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Giber, Helen Cixous, and other women critics deconstruct patriarchal ideology in order to put their gynocentric ideology for better future, fortune, and prospect. Showalter, however, concludes that no theory can be substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women’s texts, which constitute women’s essential subject. Cultural anthropology and social history can perhaps offer women a terminology and a diagram of women’s cultural situation. But gynocritics critics must use this concept in relation to what women actually write, not in relation to a theoretical, political,
metaphorical, or visionary ideal of what women ought to write. Through gynocritics, we have the opportunity to learn something solid, enduring and about the relation of women to literary culture.

References:


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