

Towards Feministic Poetics

Elaine Showalter

Introduction

Elaine Showalter is one of America's literary scholars and a pioneer in the feminist studies of nineteenth century female authors. Showalter is concerned by stereotypes of feminism that see feminist critics as being 'obsessed with phallus' and 'obsessed with destroying male critics'. Showalter wonders if such stereotypes emerge from the fact that feminism lacks a fully articulated theory. According to Showalter the academic demand for theory can only be heard as a threat to the feminist need for authenticity and the visitor looking for a formula that he or she take away without personal encounter is not welcome. Hence Showalter wants to outline a Poetics of Feminist Criticism.

Feminist Critique

Feminist critique focuses on women as a reader who is consuming the male-produced literature. It is a way of criticizing in which a female reader changes the apprehension of the given text, awakening it to the significance of sexual codes. The historically grounded inquiry of the critique probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. They are concerned about the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omission of and misconceptions about women in criticism and the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience. Feminist critiques are essentially political and polemical. It is metaphorically similar to Old Testament seeking 'the grace of imagination' and looking for the errors of the past.

Gynocritic

Showalter provides an exemplary critique of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to demonstrate that one of the problems of feminist critique is that it is 'male-oriented' which means even when criticizing patriarchy, the focus is towards male. As an alternative Showalter presents gynocritics as a way to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adapt to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritic is concerned with woman as writer, the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of women. They eschew the inevitability of the male models and theories and seeks a purely female model. She claims that women writers have their own tradition.

Three Phases

Showalter says that women's writing in the past was overlooked and undervalued by the male critics. She has reconstructed the past of literary history of women and classifies women's writing into three phases that establishes the continuity of the female tradition from decade to decade.

Feminine Phase

Showalter sees the first phase taking place from 1840 to 1880. She declares that this phase is characterized by women in an effort to equal the intellectual of the male culture. It exerted an irregular pressure on the narrative, affecting tone, diction, structure and characterization. The women writers internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards. The distinguishing sign of this period is the male pseudonym as women were not allowed to write. Bronte Sisters, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell are some of the women writers who belong to this phase.

Feminist Phase

The Feminist Phase follows from 1880 to 1920 in which women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to demonstrate the ordeals of wronged womanhood. The women writers of this phase like Elizabeth Robins, Francis Trallope and others protested against the male canons and values. It is a period of separatist utopia. They developed a sense of personal injustice and wrote biased of male. This phase is characterized by the visions of perfect, female-led societies of the future.

Female Phase

Showalter posits the third phase, the Female phase, which began in 1920. In this phase women rejected both imitation and protest which are two forms of dependency. The female experience became the source of an autonomous art. They differentiate female and male writing in terms of language. They extend the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. The effort to identify and analyse the female experience leads them to this phase of self discovery.