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Methods and Spaces: Re-reading Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness"

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Abstract

Elaine Showalter's essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" has significantly influenced feminist literary criticism, serving as a cornerstone text studied meticulously by students and scholars alike. It critically traces the genealogy of feminist criticism up to the 1980s, offering a comprehensive overview of the diverse positions and debates within feminist theory during that era. Despite its acclaim, there has been a noticeable lack of critical analysis focused specifically on the essay itself, with much attention instead directed towards its historiographical insights. This paper seeks to address this gap by approaching Showalter's essay from new critical perspectives centered on methodology and spatiality. It aims to demonstrate how Showalter's work exhibits visionary qualities in both her methodological approach and her exploration of the intersections between space and gender. By examining how Showalter employs research methodology to illuminate feminist literary history and by analyzing her strategic engagement with spatial dynamics in feminist discourse, this study aims to highlight the essay's enduring relevance and innovative contributions to feminist criticism. In doing so, this paper endeavors to shed light on overlooked aspects of Showalter's essay, offering fresh insights that enrich our understanding of its scholarly significance and its broader implications for feminist literary theory.

Keywords: Feminist criticism, Literary theory, Methodology, Spatiality, Gender studies, Historiography, Feminist theory, Critical perspectives, Genealogy

Elaine Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" has been an important text in feminist literary criticism. The brief essay is studied carefully by students and scholars across the world even today as a key feminist text that critically addresses a genealogy of feminist criticism up to the 1980s. First published in 1981 in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, Showalter's

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essay is crucial because of several reasons. First, it speaks of a new practice for feminist criticism and theory, emphasizing women's writing rather than pondering over what other critics (primarily men) have written about women. Emerging from her concern for the lack of theoretical grounding in feminism, or her point that "it [feminist criticism] has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm" (Showalter 180), she refers to this new critical practice as 'gynocriticism', that should replace an earlier 'feminist critique'. Showalter's review of the scenario of feminist criticism also makes her criticize the tendency of feminist critics, initially, to resist defining and categorizing a vibrant activity. Showalter mentions that "An early obstacle to constructing a theoretical framework for feminist criticism was the unwillingness of many women to limit or bound an expressive and dynamic enterprise" (180-81). Showalter locates this, however, as an 'evolutionary phase' that subsequently moves towards a later

...second stage characterized by anxiety about the isolation of feminist criticism from a critical community increasingly theoretical in its interests and indifferent to women's writing. The question of how feminist criticism should define itself with relation to the new critical theories and theorists has occasioned sharp debate in Europe and the United States (181).

Showalter also refers to Nina Auerbach's comment that

Feminist critics seem particularly reluctant to define themselves to the uninitiated. There is a sense in which our sisterhood has become too powerful; as a school, our belief in ourselves is so potent that we decline communication with the networks of power and respectability we say we want to change (qtd in Showalter 181).

Showalter realizes the importance of feminist criticism to address the 'uninitiated', particularly such male critics who ignore the nuances of feminist criticism precisely because of the lack of a theoretical framework, while feminist critics also deny critical communication with such schools of thought that they ironically wish to transform. Showalter aims to transform this deadlock by introducing a theoretical premise grounded on women's writings and located beyond revisionism and pluralism. Showalter brilliantly suggests:

It is time for feminist criticism to decide whether between religion and revision we can claim any firm theoretical ground of our own. In calling for a feminist criticism that is genuinely women centered, in-dependent, and intellectually coherent, I do not mean to endorse the separatist fantasies of radical feminist visionaries or to exclude from our critical practice a variety of intellectual tools. But we need to ask much more searchingly what we want to know and how we can find answers to the questions that come from *our* experience (184).

This leads Showalter towards an attempt to define the feminine through 'gynocriticism', a new critical practice that seeks to focus on literature and writings by women instead of harping on an androcentric critical tradition. This, Showalter argues, unlike 'feminist critique', would offer feminist criticism with a new conceptual vantage point and address the debated question of the 'difference' of women's writing (184-85). Her essay next devotes itself to the crucial task of understanding the difference of women's writing through four models of 'difference', all of

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which have emerged diversely ‘gynocentric’. These four models are biological/anatomical, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural, in relation to women’s writing, and Showalter identifies the final cultural model as one that suits best to current discourses in feminist criticism towards understanding the ‘difference’ of women’s writing.

This critical perspective in Showalter’s essay has been much discussed. The present article instead, seeks to depart from this discourse on gynocriticism and focus on certain fresh perspectives. Apart from its position on gynocriticism, the essay is famous because it has been clinically up-to-date, and it is a brilliant sourcebook for the varying feminist positions and debates that were current in the late twentieth century. Showalter is careful not to leave out any of the significant feminist schools, movements, and concerns up to the publication of her essay. This is one of the major strengths of her essay—it remains a close knit piece that adequately reviews existing literature, closely remarking on their various vantage points. For the student often lost in the abyss of feminist scholarship, the essay is a good point of reference for a clear understanding of the historiography of feminist scholarship and the basic line of difference between different schools of feminist thought.

Re-reading “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” after the second decade of the twenty-first century continues to be a rewarding experience. One of the reasons for this is the methodology implicated by Showalter throughout her essay. Detailed attention to research methodology is a recent development. It is only lately that academic writing has begun giving adequate emphasis on formatting, citation, documentation and structure of the research paper. The standardized formatting rules and style sheets of the MLA, APA or Chicago manuals, have structured the research paper in global terms like never before. These standardized formatting guidelines are of utmost importance to the researcher today from the perspective of academic integrity and credibility of the author. However, when Showalter wrote her essay, academic standards were hardly applicable. The standardized set of rules that oversee academic writing today wasn’t available even in the US academia in the early 1980s. In her introduction to research methods in English studies, Griffin notes:

In the 1980s, when I was a postgraduate student, research methods did not figure at all—research was what you did, and the best you could hope for was a brief introduction to the vagaries of the library. There was no sense that you needed to know about the process of conducting research, or that how you did it might influence the outcome. (1)

Griffin herself had been a postgraduate student in the UK but the situation in the US academia was hardly different. Showalter’s essay, on the other hand, maintains the basic principles of acknowledging and documenting sources even without a structured methodology. For a research article of the early 1980s, the essay is remarkably precise in its methodology. Showalter divides her essay into six sections and each section comes with a sub-heading that introduces the key concerns of that section. The first section “Pluralism and the Feminist Critique” is basically the introduction to Showalter’s project. The second section “Defining the Feminine: Gynocritics and the Women’s Text” emphasizes and introduces gynocriticism as a new form of feminist inquiry that aims to replace feminist critique. In a postmodern turn, this section ends with an identification of difference as a central position in contemporary feminist

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criticism and tries to understand where might a theory of difference of women's writing may be located. This theoretical search is spread across the next four sections entitled, "Women's Writing and Woman's Body", "Women's Writing and Women's language", "Women's Writing and Woman's Psyche", and "Women's Writing and Women's Culture". As discussed above, each of these is a model of difference of a theory of women's writing, with the first model based on body or feminist biocriticism at the base, and with the next three models being hierarchically over it as improved models. The model based on culture is at the apex, because it accommodates all the previous models and even goes beyond in a best possible reading and understanding of the difference constituting women's writing. In the model based on women's culture, Showalter praises and uses the mode of feminist cultural analysis used by Oxford anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardner, who suggest that women constitute a muted group within the dominant male culture and further constitutes a "double-voiced discourse that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant" (Showalter 201). She moves on to suggest that this notion of "double voiced discourse" can be read in conjunction with Gilbert and Gubar's idea of the "palimpsest" while Clifford Geertz's contextual analysis of "thick description" may provide another interpretive strategy for feminist criticism. Through all these models, Showalter's feminist methodology is discernible. Without losing focus of her aim of evidencing a gynocritical turn across varied feminist projects, she continuously refers to the feminist scholarship in different spaces and approaches.

The first section of her essay, "Pluralism and the Feminist Critique" is introductory in nature. Showalter introduces her key concerns in the essay that include the problems of locating a theoretical basis for feminist criticism. In the process however, she presents a brilliant review of existing literature. A proper review of literature, as we now know, is a mandatory part of research today and research scholars are taught how to review literature in the field. No new research can emerge from vacuum and theoretical positions and textual sources are foundational to new research. The review of existing literature provides the scope of the researcher's foundational work, the premise of her/his work. Showalter's introductory section can certainly work as a model because not only does she adequately review latest trends in American feminist criticism but she also includes her critical insights with regard to the debates on a theoretical basis for feminist criticism. Beginning with Heilbrun and Stimpson's "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue", Showalter indicates the polarity of contemporary feminist criticism on the one hand in their conscious denial of engaging in theoretical debates that they consider to be a part of a dominant masculine discourse whereas another section has been already contributing to that debate through emerging academic journals. Showalter regards this debate as an evolution, and moves on to identify the emphasis on revisionist feminist criticism through the examples of Annette Kolodny, and Gilbert and Gubar. In a final movement Showalter warns against the limited critical stance of pluralism and seeks to expand it in women's experience. The first section thus prepares the ground for an inquiry into defining the feminine experience through gynocriticism and she achieves this through what we would now understand as a detailed review of literature. In the sections on the models of women's writing and difference, Showalter sticks to a methodology of balancing a detailed review of literature

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with her own critical insights towards a theoretical basis for feminist criticism. Apart from the comprehensive critical impact of “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, Showalter’s methodology and critical approach in the early days of research methodology is thus worth a fresh look.

In the second section, this brief article turns away from methodology towards another critical element in Showalter’s essay—its concern with space and spatiality. The title “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” draws attention to space, the preposition ‘in’ suggesting the location of feminist criticism which, as the essay would show, is presently wilderness. Showalter’s essay thus has space and place as key concerns but this aspect has been largely ignored in studies on the essay.

Recent advances in interdisciplinary studies in the humanities and social sciences have indicated a rise in critical inquiries of space and place. With globalization and the rise of global cities, the social perception of spaces has been transforming. The sense of space and topology as dynamic and worthy of cultural inquiry has shifted from the predominance of history and time as chief forms of humanistic inquiry. Such new forms of spatial epistemology have evolved from the work of humanistic geographers who have extensively debated the dichotomous nature of space and place. Commonly perceived, while place is a tangible, geographic location, space is more abstract. Both however are continuously imagined and constructed. For Tim Cresswell the terms space, place and landscape are closely interrelated and their definitions are highly contested (12). This is because humanistic geography views space and place not only from geographical positions but also from philosophical and existential vantage points. Henry Lefebvre, for instance, in his influential book *The Production of Space*, elaborates his notion of “social space” as produced, distinguishing between spatial practice, representation of space and representational spaces (33). For Yi-Fu-Tuan space is freedom while place is a pause:

“Space” is more abstract than “place.” The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (6).

Showalter uses the notion of the space of wilderness throughout her essay in a metaphysical sense that relates to consciousness rather than a real, lived place. Hence, I would like to argue that it is possible to read Showalter’s awareness of spatiality in her essay from perspectives of experiential and humanistic geography. Tuan’s understanding of space quoted above seems particularly relevant for Showalter, since she sees feminist criticism around the 1980s to be in the wilderness, preparing to evolve towards a theory of difference. Showalter follows Geoffrey Hartman, for whom “all criticism is in the wilderness” and though Hartman never mentions women critics Showalter shows how feminist criticism is already in the wilderness, in company of “theoretical pioneers” (Showalter 180). Early in the essay, Showalter is thus clear about her critical purpose in the essay, that the wilderness of theory must be embraced: “...between feminist ideology and the liberal ideal of disinterestedness lies

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the wilderness of theory, which we too must make our home” (180). Showalter draws attention to the intersection of gender and space when she recognizes that the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain but she rejects the revisionary perspective of feminist criticism that makes feminist critics stay away from such masculine realms and therefore runs the risk of being isolated “from a critical community increasingly theoretical in its interests” (181). She returns to the space of wilderness right at the concluding statement of the essay where she remarks that the task of feminist critics is to study women’s writing and this realization comes with the awareness that “the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself” (Showalter 205). Showalter’s understanding of wilderness is thus heavily spatialized and she sees this as a metaphysical creative and critical woman’s space.

Just before concluding her discussion, Showalter examines Ardener’s model of intersecting circles, illustrating the relationship between dominant and muted groups. The "wild zone" crescent on both sides can be interpreted spatially, experientially, or metaphysically. Showalter argues that while the wild zones are equivalent for both sexes in spatial and experiential terms, metaphysically, there is no corresponding male crescent because male consciousness resides entirely within the circle of dominant structure, shaped and accessible through language (200). This conceptual framework leads Showalter to propose that the very inaccessibility of women’s wild zone could become the focal point of gynocritical feminist criticism. Here, Showalter emphasizes a metaphysical spatiality that advocates for freedom of movement and expression within an exclusive women’s sphere. Showalter’s conceptualization aligns closely with Yi-Fu Tuan’s perspective on space as liberating and open, contrasting with the stability and fixity of place. Yi-Fu Tuan, renowned as a reflective humanistic geographer concerned with personal experience and subjective exploration, has notably influenced feminist geographers. Paul Rodaway observes that feminist geographers have embraced Tuan’s emphasis on personal experience and self-discovery, viewing the personal as inherently political (430). Tuan’s influential works, including *Topophilia* (1974) and *Space and Place* (1977), explore these themes within a humanistic geographical context. Given Showalter’s scholarly breadth and her tenure at Douglass College, Rutgers University, during the period when Tuan’s works gained prominence, it is plausible that she encountered and engaged with his ideas. This suggests the potential to explore Showalter’s engagement with spatial politics and spatiality in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” through an interdisciplinary lens, addressing broader humanistic concerns. This essay aims to demonstrate how Showalter’s work can be reconsidered through fresh perspectives that traverse from methodological insights to spatial exploration.

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