

## Women's Literature and Gynocriticism: A Critical Study

د/ أسماء أيوب

مدرس بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية- كلية الآداب- جامعة أسوان

### **Abstract**

Women's literature is a type of writing done by women. What makes the history of women's writing so motivating is that in numerous it is a new field of study. The tradition of women's writing has been much ignored due to the inferior position women have held in the patriarchal societies. This study challenges to explain the vitality of gynocriticism to women's literature to show their own uniqueness that men cannot recognize, and emphasize the recent visible world of their culture. Gynocriticism mainly through Elaine Showalter attempts to build a female basis for the study of women's literature, to present new images based on the study of female experience, rather than to apply male depictions and theories. The study's aim is to explore the originality and individuality of women's literature because of the theory of gynocriticism. Gynocriticism stresses that women's literature is a reproduction of their true existence and experiences defined by culture and place.

### **Key Words**

Women's literature, Gynocriticism, Elaine Showalter, patriarchy, Originality and individuality

**الملخص**

إن الأدب النسوي هو الأدب التي تكتبه المرأة. إن ما يجعل تاريخ كتابة المرأة محفزاً للغاية هو أنها من المجالات الجديدة للدراسة وذلك من نواح عديدة، حيث جري العرف علي تجاهل الكتابة النسوية كثيراً وذلك بسبب المكانة المتدنية التي احتلتها النساء في المجتمعات الذكورية. وتبين هذه الدراسة أهمية نظرية النقد النسوي لإظهار مدى تميز أدب المرأة الذي لم يكن من الممكن أن يدركه الرجل وتأكيداً للعالم الحديث لثقافتهم. وتهتم نظرية النقد النسوي من خلال محاولات إيلين شولتر لبناء كيان خاص للمرأة بدراسة الإنتاج الأدبي لها، وتقديم تصورات جديدة من خلال التجارب التي تمر بها ، وهذا بدلاً من تطبيق التصورات والنظريات الذكورية.ومن ثم فتهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف أصالة وفردية أدب المرأة وذلك بسبب نظرية النقد النسوي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:**

الأدب النسوي- النقد الجينثوي (النسوي) - إيلين شولتر- المجتمع الذكوري- الأصالة والفردية

## Introduction

Women's literature is a literary production that is written by women. It is an essential field of study. For a long time, the tradition of women writing has been much marginalized because of the inferior position women have held in the societies that have been dominated by patriarchy. Traditionalists believe that men are born to control and women to be subordinate. They think that this hierarchy has always existed and will remain, and like other rules of nature this one too cannot be changed. There are others who challenge these beliefs and say that patriarchy is not natural, but it is man-made and it can be changed. Therefore, the responsibility of women's literature, then, is to classify and create an area of study for a group of people ignored by history and to find through their writing their true experiences and their hopes (Rivera).

Feminist literary criticism is fundamentally a social, political, and moral movement for equality of the sexes. It also tries to finish discrimination against women and expose the ideology of patriarchal society in works of art (Nayar 83). As Murfin has distinguished, the development of feminism has adopted a more comprehensive and universal perspective (301-302). The age of recovering women's texts has been succeeded by a new era in which the aim is to improve the whole cultures of women. Certainly, feminism has often concentrated on what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the marginalization and silencing of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture existed for the support of men.

One of the most important parts of the feminist literary criticism is gynocriticism. Gynocriticism was used as the theory for supporting women's literature. It is derived from the Greek *gyno* which means "woman," and *kentron* which means "center". It is a radical feminist discourse that focuses on woman-centered beliefs, characteristics, identities,

and social organization.

In gynocriticism, some issues have been explored as specific patterns that appear in women's writing, women's subjective experiences, cultures formed between women and psychological aspects that are only felt by woman. For instance, the depiction of women who are different and more positive, the figure of women who are not married, the effect of female writers on other female writers and a representation of women's community in texts. These issues are considered not significant because the choice of topic is not according to the tastes of the majority that are controlled by the patriarchal society.

Elaine Showalter is a significant American literary critic, feminist, and writer on social and cultural issues. She develops the concept of gynocriticism and its practice. Elaine assumes that *Écriture Feminine* is largely about women's repression but also suggests that it has slowly become gynocentric, focusing more on women's writing. She mainly searched for describing gynocriticism, which should be in her description:

Look at the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution of a female literary tradition. (Showalter 184-185)

A main concept in gynocriticism is the French concept of *écriture féminine*. The literal meaning of this term is "women's writing," or "feminine writing", but theoretically refers to various forms of narrative that diverge from the writing of masculine. *Écriture féminine* claims that phallogentrism confirms the creativity of male and sees it as superior to that of female. Helene Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" mentions that it is necessary for women to write from the experience of women (878). One

example of *écriture féminine* by various critics is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* because of its layers of narrative and circular structure told from a sequence of various voices.

Showalter stresses on the idea that gynocriticism concerned with the specificity of women's experience and women's writing and "a framework for the analysis of woman literature" (Showalter). Her well known works are *Women's Liberation and Literature*; *Female Studies IV*; *Women's Studies*; *Signs: Journal of Women; Culture and Society* and *A literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (1977)*. She was one of the first feminists to build an efficient program that was critical of the androcentrism of mainstream literary studies and concentrate on the "subculture" of women writers and readers. She coined the term *gynocritics* to refer to this project, suggesting in her article "Towards a Feminist Poetics" that the program of gynocritics is to build a female basis for the examination of women's literature, to develop new forms based on the study of the experience of the female, rather than to adapt the theories and models of the male. Gynocriticism begins when the society is free from the linear ideologies of male literary history, and stop trying to situate women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the new evident world of the culture of the female (131).

Women's culture's aim is to redefine women's interests, aims and activities from a female's point of view. Women's culture states the broad-based communality of relationships, values, institutions and methods of communication. Some feminist historians have assigned that due to female political existence is the model of separate sphere; they have seen the movement from women's sphere to women's culture to women's right activism. This is confirmed when Abrams mentions that "Much of the feminist literary criticism continues in our times to be interpreted with the movement by political feminists for social, legal and cultural freedom and

equality” (88).

For some feminist critics, the “female space” or the “wild zone” must be the address of women centered criticism, theory and art. The critics of the French feminist prefer to make the wild zone the theoretical base of women’s difference. Therefore, the difference of women’s writing can only be understood on the basis of the cultural relations.

Thus, gynocriticism focusses on women as producers of texts (Showalter 25). It is the authority of women's writing in order to learn what women really feel and experience. This study sheds light on women’s writing as a demand for re-writing of the canon of literature, and confirm on the individuality of women's literature because of gynocriticism.

### **Literature Review**

There are plenty of previous studies that discuss the ideas of feminism and the theory of gynocriticism, and the link between the theory and the development of female especially in the field of writing. These studies shed the light on the distinctiveness of literature written by women.

Finke challenges to reconsider the concept of the woman writer. She encounters conventions about gender, the identity, and the text which motivate vital concepts of modern theory of feminism. She continues that some of the main concepts shaping feminist literary criticism need to be reconsidered within both their historical context and the larger framework of current theory concerning value, subjectivity and language (29).

Damono stresses the idea that Gynocritics also aims to explore the construction of gender culture and identity in literary works. The study paves the way to understand the importance of gender to give literature the main ideas behind its production (20).

Huang explores in his dissertation concept of “a woman’s sentence” of the novelist Virginia Woolf and its implication of the language of the female. It reveals how Woolf discovers an innovative method to write fiction that shapes the values of women and her struggle of a traditional discourse.

Guerin et. al in the book *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* offers readers a variety of clearly articulated approaches to interpret literature. One of them is that of Showalter, the scholar that leads the theory of gynocriticism. Guerin asks if Showalter reduces women writers merely to bodies (225).

Rani stated that feminist criticism has required the appreciation of women’s writing, and a fundamental reconsidering of literary study's conceptual grounds. With Sandra Gilbert, Showalter accepts that feminist criticism needs to clarify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between genre and gender textuality and sexuality, and cultural identity and psychosexual identity. Accordingly, the study tries to present the aim of feminist criticism that is to develop the canon to include ignored types of women’s writing as diaries, romance, science fiction, and letters (1-5).

Shaheen and Nazir expose the idea that gender plays an important role in the building of self. Due to gender politics women are particularly oppressed, and they have to find the reason of this oppression to be able to resist it. They suffer not only from the patriarchal society and constraints of tradition but also from the cruel institution of slavery that strips them of all rights of motherhood and womanhood. Gynocentric perception gives understanding of the lives of the women and trace the prospects that interconnect the ways of oppression. Women have played their role in sharing the responsibilities of family and society where men have often shrunk their responsibilities and consider them as inferior (196-212).

Nouri& Aziz discuss the female novelist Carter, in her literary works trying to

encourage women to do something about this degrading representation by rising up and fighting against the oppression and fighting for equality. This study stresses on the idea that Carter tries through her novels to introduce a new way for encountering difficulties (100-106).

AlGweirien, in his paper, addresses the relationship between wife and husband in terms of gender inequality and women's identity. It also tackles women's trapped position as distinct from the liberty of men and oppressed by husband in an unhappy marriage. It relies heavily not only on feminist perspectives as gynocriticism, gender inequality, and the theme of marriage; but also on the authors' personal life. The paper concludes that being unable to speak their voice freely, women view writing as their salvation for their voice to be heard (120).

The study of Eyvazi, Momen and Poorkaramali focuses on three different novels by Iranian female authors to illustrate three stages of female writing development based on theory of gynocriticism of Elaine Showalter: Feminine stage which is shown through concepts like home immovability, consumption, reading, house chores, dependence and past, feminist stage dealing with concepts like mobility, production, independence and future, and female stage that presents a new awareness of women's consciousness (211).

The study by Aldeeb indicates that all females will be able to face different kinds of oppression, if they unite together. This kind of unity should be in Arab countries where economic security is a crucial need. The researcher uses two different feminist models together: gynocriticism and Intersectionality to examine women by a Saudi writer in a contemporary novel (135-144).

Hermawati shows that women writers represent experiences and women's issues in their works. Women authors also write down their perspectives and responses on the patriarchal culture that surround their lives with a Balinese cultural setting.



Oka Rusmini also conveys resistance of social and cultural constructions which make women become subordinate through the attitude and life of the characters in her novel (176-186).

The study of Asri, Hayati and Adek emphasizes the idea that to be aware of the women's culture, historians see and differentiate various aspects of identity, roles, relationships, attitudes and pictures of women's lives formed in the culture of society in general. It presents the Female authors who express the women's culture in their works. This study discusses how the women's culture is embodied in a novel written by a woman. A work that is written with attention to the cultural elements of women shows the lives of women through narration and experience (181-186).

The review of literature in this paper presents enough justification and importance of the analysis of the present study.

## **Discussion**

Humans could have access to honor, power, and language; nevertheless, the amount of their benefit could be determined by their being male or female throughout most cultures and lots of centuries. If they were female, they would get the minor share. Not only could men get more privilege in materialistic concerns; but also they enjoyed cultural, psychological, and religious superiority too. On the contrary, female used to be considered as the inferior in society who could not have any proper access to the social resources. It has been supposed that the oppression of the female has been started from the families for centuries, and all over Europe. There were families who got rid of needless daughters by shutting them away in convents (Walters 45). The idea of female oppression has shown through the whole society whether educated or uneducated people like "Aristotle [who] stated that 'the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities...

[or] 'imperfect man'." (Seldon, etal )

This is clear through considering the literary works by female authors as ordinary or insignificant works, which will never be compared with the writings produced by male authors (Suryaman, Wiyatmi, & Liliani). Women writers have had to come out of inferior constructions and the male style of thought. They have had to resist their submission and the male rules. Through their own writing, women started to know and discover themselves. Women's writing has given power to them as Snitow mentioned that feminism will give independence and identity for women's literature. It has been touching through self-questioning and self-expression, and it has made a new description of women. Their writing has attempted to move towards female meanings and break with patriarchy. The women of present generation began to present their feelings and own voices as independent members of society. It was during the feminist movement that the dual classification of sex and gender came to be important. In the appearance of feminist criticism, gender has been considered as a vital factor in the production and consumption of literature. Therefore, one of the lasting visions of feminist literary critics is to present, study, and choose the unique works and writers of women to be compiled into their own literary canon.

According to Elaine Showalter, it was through the women's liberation movement that women began to connect between their own work and their own lives to study and write literature. She presents three important stages of women's writing. First, the imitation of the mainstream literary tradition; second, the protest against the standards of this dominant tradition; and third, self-discovery which aims at a search for identity. Showalter identifies these stages as Feminine, Feminist and Female. In the Feminine, women wrote trying to be equal with the intellectual achievements of the male writers. Their feminine concerns were insubordinate. To confirm that their

writings reach the masses they had to disguise themselves under a male pseudonym. In the second phase, women expressed specifically the needs, difficulties and complaints of the female. Women authors' responsibility and role in facing the dominant conditions of women experienced a change during this phase. In the third phase, women tried to be independent from all constraints through refusing to imitate and protest; but they focused on their energies to explore female experience as the source of self-directed art. This phase is marked by self-discovery. This phase prepared the grounds for the start of gynocriticism that concerned with. Male literature is left behind to focus on a female analysis of women's literature and to develop new models based on the study of female experience.

Therefore, Showalter has presented women who pass through different phases to reach their own place in society, and this is reflected in their writings. She believes that at the beginning of the feminist movement, women learnt to be objective, challenge the ideological forces, and break with their own traditional image. Eventually, they can come to an understanding of their real self in society. In fact, their awareness helps them to redefine their own roles as independent members. These three stages which are respectively titled feminine, feminist, and female show how women have reached their own place in society and acquired consciousness and individuality.

In *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, Showalter discusses that theory of gynocriticism studies the history of women's literature, writing styles, themes, genres, creativities, and professions, development and culture of women writers. It presents four models to study the writings of women writers. They are women's writings in relation to women's body, women's language, women's psyche and women's culture. Ideas about the body, language, and psychology are combined together through the cultural point of view that are based on the social and cultural context contained in the

life of women. This means that socio-cultural aspects play a central role in constructing the identity, roles and relationships of women's lives and literature.

Sholwater claims that culture of women is about the values and women's way of life as a part of doing activities and a living community together. Women's culture is also about the mission, relations and forms of communication of women in society. Gerda Lerner also affirms that discussing the activities and issues of women based on their views is their culture. This means that women writers act as a creator. The writer can create the world and culture as a place of resistance that can be seen through narration written or produced by women writers in their works.

Showalter has defined the development of women centered criticism which essentially emphasizes the re-evaluation and recovery of women's writing as an expression of women's experience. Showalter writes:

Feminist Criticism began when women who were students, teachers, writers, editors or simply readers, began to note the limited and secondary roles allotted to fictional heroines, women writers and female critics, and to ask serious questions about their own literary study" (Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan 179).

Showalter asks the question "What is the difference in Women's writing?" This question began the shift from an androcentric to a gynocentric feminist criticism. Revisionist readings of the male canon can therefore no longer contain the momentum of women's criticism. Showalter describes four current modes of difference taken up by many feminists around the world: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. These models are sequential with each being subsumed and enhanced by the one

following. Thus, the cultural model provides a more satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women's writing. Showalter, then, starts the work of providing a ground for feminist criticism which transforms women literature.

The feminist writer does an effort to examine and understand the material conditions through which gender has been shaped within special languages. Gender referred to women and women's writing. All women's writing has been studied from feminist point of view of gynocriticism in which gender is a vital element. Ostriker confirms on the necessity of gender that the writer's gendered experience is as important as their nationality, age and language. Therefore, the effects of gender and female sexuality can be seen throughout their works. Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray are also writers whose work pieces have had a great influence on global feminism and the explanation of women's writing style (Fauvrelle-Pomeon 184). With gynocriticism, literature has achieved a new debate; literary works have attained an original dimension, the dimension of a new voice. Feminist criticism developed a new dimension in the 20th century when such well-known writers and critics as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and many others produced influential texts. The works of these inspiring women provided a framework for feminist criticism.

“Feminist theory is about thinking for ourselves – women generating knowledge about women and gender for women” (Jackson and Jones 1). Elaine Showalter finds a number of problems with the literature and theory produced by men as it is prejudiced: focusing only on what men think women should be like rather than giving priority to women's thoughts, feelings and subjective consciousness. Showalter maintains about the construction of knowledge based on distinguishing female experience. Women should be the creator and consumer of this

knowledge. She uses the term Gynocriticism to name this knowledge. While giving its features she explains: “structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition” (Showalter 310).

Women's life experience is always motivating to be written. Women's literary works are reflected in numerous perspectives and stories. Literary works can also contain women's voices that live in the inequalities of sociocultural structures. In this case, a woman either real or fictional must find a way to express themselves and invite people to listen to their voice so as to reconstruct the various stereotypes that the society puts on women. This is part of the women's culture.

The women's experiences that are articulated can become knowledge and awareness for other women. As expressed by Showalter's culture model, women's experience is a significant feature that can be seen in their culture, and presented in their literary works. This is strengthened by Lerner's opinion which shows that to understand the women's culture, it is important to see the women's experience from the point of view of women themselves. Women authors produce a positive and helpful existence for their female characters. Their female characters are strong-willed, determined, self-confident, independent and innovative. They create a voice for the ignored by supporting gender equity as a basis for development.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussion, gynocentricism is an important theory that enables women writers in their literary works to have the space to express different experiences of their gender and achieve individuality, uniqueness and creativity.

Gynocriticism is concerned to revalue femininity positively because women writers have the ability to communicate women's experiences better, particularly matters that men writers cannot know or experience. Though, women's experience is certainly not the same, it also relies on the background of race, social class, religion, group and ethnicity. So that women's voices are not singular or similar, but it can be diversely articulated. Thus, the writings about woman from women writers will be varied and the creativity and originality will be clear. Therefore, gynocriticism is preoccupied with understanding how women's literature both expresses and shapes women's experiences and perspectives. Gynocriticism extends feminist theory by arguing that women have distinct experiences that require separate analytical tools for examining literature written by and about women. The result is the production of real, individual and unique women's literature.

## References

- Abrams, Meyer. Howard. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. New Delhi: Thomson Heinle, 1999.
- Aldeeb, Najlaa. "A Gynocritic-Intersectional Reading of Raja Alem'S the Dove'S Necklace". *Arab World English Journal for Translation and Literary Studies*, vol 2, no. 1, 2018, pp. 135-144. *AWEJ Group*,  
<https://doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol2no1.10>.
- AlGweirien, Hussien. "Virginia Woolf'S Representation of Women: A Feminist Reading Of "The Legacy"". *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol 7, no. 1, 2017, p. 120. *Canadian Center Of Science And Education*,  
<https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v7n1p120>.
- Asri, yasnur; Hayati, Yenni and Adek, Muhammad." Women'S Perspective on Love, Loyalty, And the Other Woman in Indonesian Literature". *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities*, 2020, vol. 424, pp.181-186.
- Cixous, Helene."The Laugh of the Medusa". Trans. Keith and Paula Cohen. *Signs*. Summer, 1976.
- Collier, Peter and Helga Geyer-Ryan, editors. *Literary Theory Today*. New York: Cornwell University Press, 2000.
- Damono, S. D. Kata Pengantar. *In Kumpulan Cerpen Dunia Perempuan*. Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya, 2002.
- Eyvazi, Mojgan & Momen, Mohsen & Poorkaramali, Homa. A Study of Selected Works of Iranian Female Novelists Based on Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 2017, vol.6, no.6, p.211, 10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.4



Fauvrelle-Pomeon, Marie. *Female writing with Hélène Cixous: "Tambours sur*

*La Digue" or the Rhythm of the Puppet.* Sainte- Etienne, 2019.

Finke, Laurie. *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing.* Cornell University Press, 2018.

Guerin, Wilfred, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 5th edition. New York: OUP, 2005.

Hermawati, Yessy. "Kenanga: Women's Culture (An Analysis of Novel, A Work of Female Author with Prespective Elaine Showalter Culture Model)". *Proceedings of the 1 st Annual International Conference on Language and Literature, 18-19 April 2018, Fakultas Sastra, UISU, Medan, Indonesia*, pp- 176-186.

Huang, Jing-yun. "Towards A Feminine/Feminist/Female Discourse of Virginia Woolf.". National Sun Yat-Sen University, 2022.

Jackson, Stevi & Jones, Jackie. *Contemporary Feminist Theories.* Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

Lerner, Gerda. *Bibliography in the History of American Women.* Sarah Lawrence College, 1978.

Murfin, Ross C. "What is Feminist Criticism?" in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly editor. Johanna M. Smith, 2nd edition, Boston: Bedford 1st Martin's, 2000.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Literary Theory Today.* New Delhi: Prestige, 2006.

Nouri, A., & Aziz Mohammadi, F. A gynocritical study of *The Company of*

Wolves by Angela Carter. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, vol. 48, 2015, pp.100-106,  
<https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/> ILSHS.48.100

Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

Rani, Savita. Elaine Showalter's Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness: A Critique. *An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*, vol.1, n.vi, November 2013, pp. 1-5.

Rivera, Adrienne. "The History and Importance of Women's Literature". Blog. Bookstellyouwhy.com, 2022, <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/the-history-and-importance-of-womens-literature>.

Seldon, Ramen, and Widdowson, Peter, and Brooker, Peter. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Edinburgh Gate, 2005.

Shaheen, A & Nazir, K. (2004, May). The Study of Gender in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Institute of Interdisciplinary Business Research*, vol.6, no.1, May. 2004, pp.196-212.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge, London: Longman, 1988.

Showalter, Elaine. *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Showalter, Elaine. Writing and Sexual Difference. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(2), 179-205, 1981.

Showalter, Elaine. Toward a Feminist Poetics. In E. Showalter (Ed.). *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. London: Virago, 1979.

Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. London: Virago, 1978.

Snitow, Ann. "A Gender Dairy." *Conflicts in Feminism*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Rutledge, 1990

Suryaman, Maman, Wiyatmi, Nurhadi BW and Liliani, Else. "Sejarah sastra Indonesia berperspektif gender". Retrieved from <http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/pendidikan/Dr.%20Wiyatmi,%20M.Hum./Buku%20Sejarah%20Sastra-Gender.pdf>, 2011

Ghadery, Homeyra. The consideration of Ellen Schwalter's aspects of feminism critic in "Noghreh Dokhtare Daryaye Cabol". *Contemporary World Literature*, vol.2, n.433, p. 460, 2018.

Walters, Margret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.