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Research Paper

Rediscovering the "Lost Continent": Elaine Showalter, Feminist Criticism, and the Global Female Literary Tradition

Dr. Girija Suri
Assistant Professor
Amity University, Gurgaon

ABSTRACT
This essay revisits Elaine Showalter's seminal essay "The Female Tradition" from A Literature of Their Own (1977) and explores its significance in mapping a female-centered literary history. By tracing the trajectory of women's writing through the Feminine, Feminist, and Female phases, Showalter sought to recover a long-neglected tradition that remained concealed under the dominant culture. The essay merges the original write-up's language with supplementary analysis and critical dialogue, situating Showalter within broader debates in feminist literary criticism. It incorporates reflections by contemporaries such as G. H. Lewes, J. S. Mill, Ernest A. Baker, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Ellen Moers, and Nancy Cott, along with later engagements by Toril Moi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Hermione Lee. Additionally, it expands the discussion through comparative examples from world literature—Simone de Beauvoir, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta, Clarice Lispector—and Indian writers including Toru Dutt, Ismat Chughtai, Mahasweta Devi, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy. Ultimately, it argues that while Showalter's model is foundational, feminist literary criticism must continue evolving toward intersectional, transnational, and decolonial frameworks.

Keywords: *Elaine Showalter; female tradition; feminist literary criticism; gynocritics; women's writing; world literature*

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I. Introduction

Elaine Showalter's book *A Literature of Their Own*, in writer's own words "focussed on re- discovery." Her book and the essay "The Female Tradition" (taken from *A Literature of Their Own*) attempts to theorize the "issues of nationality, subculture, literary influence and literary autonomy" (Showalter 11). Showalter in her essay traces the female literary tradition, making visible that which remained concealed under the dominant culture and states that "women have had a literature of their all along" (Showalter 13). She describes the development of her female literary tradition through the Feminine, Feminist and Female stages, which is constituted by a unified set of values, conventions and experiences. Showalter attempts to visibilize the female literary activity in relation to actual physical experiences, conflicts, daily lives and strategies employed by ordinary women.

At the outset of her essay, Showalter quotes G.H. Lewes and J.S. Mill who believed that women writers were unsuccessful in creating literature that was original and independent of the predominant male literary tradition. G.H. Lewes felt that women's writings were "too much a literature of imitation" (qtd. in Showalter 11). Mill had categorically stated that women's writing did not have a "different collective character" and implied that though there were ample writings which showed women writers as self-aware of individual experiences, this literature was not able to assume a collective character and self- defining characteristics (qtd. in Showalter 13). On the other hand, critics such as Ernest Baker argue in favour of a strong unifying voice in women's literature : "the women of letters have peculiarities… resemblances distinctively feminine" (Baker 212). It is to be noted that the 'lady novelist' has often been described in terms of 'stereotypes'—childless, unmarried and neurotic.

Showalter spells out various reasons for a 'scattered', 'fragmented' and 'incoherent' discussion of women writers. First, criticism of women novelists has been narrowly focused on a few great canonical writers

such as Austen, George Eliot, Brontës and Virginia Woolf. This resulted in the incomplete ignorance of the minor women novelists whose works acted as links between the literature of one generation and the next. As a result, the lineage or literary tradition of women cannot be established coherently nor can there be a sound understanding of the writers' life with respect to socio-cultural-economic and legal changes in the society. Second, critics have faced problems in dealing with women's literature theoretically because of their ample prejudices and stereotypes of femininity and, what Showalter states—"to see in women's writing an eternal opposition of biological and aesthetic creativity" (Showalter 25). She argues that academic criticism has often overcompensated the women writer by desexing them. Showalter therefore attempts to define female literary tradition in economic, legal, social terms with an emphasis on how the biological element gets coded in the formal aspects. In her essay "Twenty Years on: A Literature of Their Own Revisited" (1978) she spells out her anti- essentialist stance – "If there was a female literary tradition, I was sure it came from imitation, literary convention, the marketplace, and critical reception, not from biology or psychology" (Showalter, "Twenty Years On" 401).

It is to be noticed that there has been a renewed interest in establishing a "systematic literary history" for women writers since the 1960s and Women's Liberation Movement. Interdisciplinary studies of Victorian women strove to make visible the specificities of literary activity and questions of the "female imagination", and women's experience gained renewed importance. Showalter states "with a new perceptual framework, material hitherto assumed to be non-existent has suddenly leaped into focus" (Showalter 21). Showalter describes this visualising process as the rising of a "lost continent of the female tradition" like "Atlantis from the sea of English literature" (Showalter 22). It is here that Showalter claims that contrary to what Mill and other male feminist critics believe, women have had a literature of their own all along. Critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks and Ellen Moers argue in favour of a recurrence of certain themes, patterns and images that form an imaginative continuum in women writing when seen collectively (Spacks 44; Moers 17).

Showalter spells out in this essay the agenda of her book. Uncomfortable with the notion of "female imagination" which propagates stereotypes, she views female literary tradition in terms of complex and evolving relationships between women writers and their society. According to her, "female imagination" is not a romantic or Freudian abstraction but rather a result of "network of influence operating in time" which is expressed in a language which too is subject to various influences, including those of the market (Showalter 29). While one can observe a set of unified values and themes which constitute female subculture, there is no fixed "pattern of deliberate progress and accumulation." As German Green notes, female literary fame is transient and therefore each generation of women writers have to "rediscover the past anew, forging, again and again the consciousness of their sex" (Green 52). Therefore Showalter does not look at any women writers' "movement" but rather a tradition in which the self-awareness of the women writer translates and manifests itself into a literary form operating under the specificities of time and place. Her criticism does not however, look at an innate sexual attitude but is rather a sociological understanding of the female tradition.

The Female Tradition

Showalter focuses on the professional woman writer writing for money. Her criticism interrogates questions such as the need to write for money, ways of negotiating the activity of writing and family, the understanding of womanhood in female writers and their relationship to other male and female writers. According to Showalter, all literary subcultures go through three phases—a prolonged phase of 'imitation' or the Feminine phase (in which the standards of dominant tradition prevail and are internalized), the phase of 'protest' or the Feminist phase (includes a demand for autonomy and advocacy of minority rights) and the phase of 'self-discovery' or the Female phase (freedom from dependency, and a search for identity). The distinctions between these phases are by no means watertight and are mutually overlapping (Showalter 13).

Showalter argues that the female subculture is a thriving and positive entity. Female consciousness, as a subculture, as Nancy Cott points out, provokes strength and weaknesses within the subculture (Cott 111). The middle-class Angel in the House is a suitable example. While the Lady is submissive to men in the patriarchal set up, she commands respect and authority by virtue of her inner purity in the realm of the Home.

Showalter's anti-biological essentialist stance is evident when she argues that in England, the female subculture came through a shared, ritualized but secretive physical, experience of puberty, menstruation, sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. The unity of women writers and the intense feelings of female solidarity, according to her are, not the unities of consciousness. Rather these are reflective of the unified elaborate codes of behaviour which a particular culture creates. The "covert solidarity" of women's novelists, according to Showalter amounted to "genteel conspiracy", even amongst the most conservative writers such as Sarah Ellis & Dinah Mulock, advocating sisterhood on the basis of the common minority experience of women (Showalter 58).

It is to be noted that from about 1750, English women started writing professionally as novelists in the literary marketplace. J.M.S Tompkins notes that most eighteenth century epistolary novels were written by

women (Tompkins 76). Ian Watt's analysis too shows that majority of novels were by women (Watt 92). On the other hand, Oliver Goldsmith noted that male sentimental novelists wrote under female pseudonyms on subjects such as childcare, midwifery, housekeeping and cookery. Men were, therefore, to "imitate, and even usurp the female experiences" (Goldsmith 104). Law of the marketplace, thus, reinforced conventional gender stereotypes. It can be argued that as a result, the early woman writer did not embody a very comfortable relationship with her role as professional. Women writers employed the stereotype of helpless femininity to win protection from male reviewers. They even evaded the issue of professional identity by publishing anonymously. Before 1840s, there was no sense of a collective or mutuality among women writers and they simply refused to deal with their professional role in a positive way.

Showalter focuses her criticism on the female novelists, born after 1800 and began publishing their works during 1840s. These writers wrote as a vocation which was in a much sharper conflict with their position as women. These writers had a canny sense of self-awareness of their roles as professionals, adapting male pseudonyms in a radical way. Showalter argues that like Eve's fig leaf, the male pseudonym signals the loss of innocence, and marks an effort by female writers to "participate in the mainstream of literary culture" (Showalter 64). There were three generations of nineteenth-century feminine novelists. The first generation novelists including the Brontës, Browning, George Eliot, Harriet Martineau created new possibilities. Charlotte Yonge, Dinah Mulock Craik, Oliphant etc. belonged to the second generation and were less original. The third generation, born between 1840-1860 were unconventional, efficient, business-like and productive.

The first generation of female novelists had already established a sense of the "feminine" novel which primarily dealt with the domestic realm. The fact remained that even the conservative writers such as Yonge and Craik were convinced that "feminine" novel stood for feebleness, ignorance and prudery. Victorian feminine novelists competed for market space, money, and opinion but found themselves at the receiving end of male condescension. Though they aimed at professional and creative excellence, there was always an anxiety about the "unwomanly" public image. It was in the face of this dilemma that women novelists developed various strategies.

They tried to justify the self-centered act of writing by preaching submission. As opposed to men, work as vocation failed to satisfy both self-interest and public interest and Victorian women did not have the luxury of "choosing" a vocation. The guilt about authorship that cultivated the ego was coped up by undermining the full, independent life which their heroines aspired for. Various novels of the period such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* dramatize this feminine role conflict and ultimately feature the status quo. Restrictive, dogmatic education and deep conditioning of social and moral norms trained Victorian girls in repression, concealment and self-censorship. As a result their literature appeared "bland and gelatinous." They had been denied the language in which they could express and describe their experiences without restraint. According to Showalter, the "delicacy and verbal fastidiousness of Virginia Woolf is an extension of this feminised language" (Showalter 74).

Showalter points out that though feminine novel was characterized by repression, women novelists found innovative ways to negotiate with the societal forces. Their writing was compact, symbolic and intense. Charlotte Bronte's subversive *Jane Eyre* is a fitting example. Similarly, many fantasies of feminine novels deal with personal ambition of the author by projecting it onto the male characters. Protest fiction channelled the anger and female experience through pre-existing issues such as child labour, prostitution and slavery. Though they still worked in the framework of feminine conventions, they dramatized female protest against marriage and economic oppression.

With the death of George Eliot began the feminist phase which confronted the male, patriarchal society and its assumptions and demanded changes in socio-political systems. The sense of injustice experienced by women till now had been camouflaged as class struggles in the novels of factory-life. However, the bonds of female subculture were strengthened in the Feminist phase which led to the collective Suffrage Movement. Feminists were devoted to each other in close, emotional friendships. They projected their own experiences onto male characters and according to Showalter, represented "a generation in uneasy transition". They represented the ideals of independence and rejection of self-sacrifice. Writers such as Virginia Woolf stressed the need to be free of patriarchal commercialism.

Members of the Women Writers Suffrage League began to look at women's literature in the complex context of male publishing industry and socialisation of women and their images in women's fiction. Victorian women writers born between1800-1900 moved beyond the Feminist phase to Female phase characterised by courageous self-exploration. Feminist writers had retreated towards a separatist literature of the inner space (Showalter 89). According to Showalter, writers like Virginia Woolf created a female aesthetic, according to which the world was polarised by sex and female sensibility that assumed a sacred quality.

However, in the 1960s, the female novel started operating in the Marxist' and Freudian contexts. These novelists of this phase combine the strengths of older female tradition with new development in language and range of experience. The works of writers like Doris Lessing and Drabble are concerned with the definition of

autonomy for the woman writer. Showalter argues / points out that contemporary women novelist will have to face the problem of either self-consciously forging female traditions, epics and mythologies or to move beyond it into a "Seamless participation in the literary mainstreams" which might be regarded as either equality or assimilation (Showalter 92).

Comparative Illustrations from World and Indian Literatures:

Showalter's model resonates beyond Britain. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* insists that one "becomes" a woman through socialization rather than nature (Beauvoir 283), a premise that underwrites Showalter's anti-essentialism. In African writing, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* anatomizes the costs of idealized maternity under colonial modernity, aligning with the Feminist phase's critique of economic and social constraint. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reconstructs a counter-archive of black female memory and trauma, pushing the Female phase toward experimental forms that center women's interiority. In Brazil, Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* turns the narrative gaze on a marginalised woman whose consciousness resists the market's objectification, again recalling Showalter's attention to form and marketplace. Indian writing charts parallel paths: Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* negotiates colonial classicism (Feminine); Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf (The Quilt)* articulates the highly tabooed subject of female desire (Feminist); Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* exposes caste, class, and state violence against subaltern women (Feminist to Female); Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* develop a self-reflexive female aesthetic grounded in memory, ecology, and social critique (Female). These examples affirm Showalter's contention that a female tradition exists "all along," while also demonstrating the need for intersectional and transnational nuance.

II. Conclusion:

Showalter further argues that the woman's novel, whether feminine, feminist or female, had to deal with socio-cultural-historical forces which always treated women's experience as secondary. Showalter's constructive approach to feminism therefore goes beyond the works of canonical women writers to those who have been excluded from literary history. She defines feminine sub culture and female tradition as evolving in relation to dominant sociological forces. In her essay "Twenty Years On: A literature of their Own Re-visited", she states that her model of a chain of female literary influence needs to be understood as a historically specific strategy rather than a dogmatic absolute (Showalter, "Twenty Years On" 410). Showalter's essay therefore is an influential anthropological and sociological query into the way literary subculture evolves and changes when the muted culture / subculture fails to be measured according to the standards of the dominant culture. If the task today is to continue raising the "lost continent," then the charting must be multilingual and global, attentive to race, class, caste, sexuality, and nation. In that expanded atlas, Showalter's three phases remain a navigational tool—revised nd contested, but still indispensable.

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