

Original Article

Contribution of Gynocriticism to Feminist Criticism

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Manuscript ID: **Abstract**

JRD -2026-180417

ISSN: 2230-9578

Volume 18

Issue 4

Pp 116-118

April- 2026

Submitted: 18 Mar. 2026

Revised: 28 Mar. 2026

Accepted: 14 Apr. 2026

Published: 30 April. 2026

Gynocriticism is the kind of feminist literary criticism that goes beyond the established and prevalent dependency upon male literary culture and literature. It is also further evolved from the feminist focus on conventional women's role, their marginalization and exploitation in a patriarchal and male dominant world. Instead, it aims to create a new tradition of women's literature, history, anthropology, linguistics, etc., that focuses on women's internal experiences, their sisterhood, and their subculture.

Key words: Gynocriticism, Feminism, Linguistics, Culture.

Introduction

Showalter emphasizes how feminist literary criticism and theory was perceived as inferior and inadequate in literary academia. During the 1970s, literary academia was completely dominated by men. Almost all prominent literary critics such as Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, etc. were men. Feminist theory and criticism were extremely isolated and misunderstood. Male critics often expected feminist critics to fit into the masculine and traditional academic norms and become indifferent and rigid to what they themselves felt. This not only made feminism lack its own distinct voice, it also made it confined to studying women only with respect to men. Gynocriticism is a critical study of women's literature that is no longer occupied with women's relationships, roles, and their treatment in a patriarchal literary society and world. Instead, it tries to study women's literature by focusing on their internal struggles and experiences, their relationships with other women, and their perceptions about life.

Besides the marginalization of feminist criticism, another obstacle for feminist movement was its resistance to theory due to the fear of it getting subsumed by the male dominant academia. Since most theorists were men, theory's language, terminology, methods depicted concepts and viewpoints only of men, and assumed them to be universal. Thus, it became increasingly difficult for female critics to depend on or welcome theory that was so rooted in patriarchy. Gynocriticism aims to reconstruct theory linguistically as well as methodologically in order to include women's issues, perceptions, culture, and experiences, and give them adequate space in literary theory and academia.

In her essay 'Toward a Feminist Poetics', Elaine Showalter categorizes feminist literary theory and criticism as either woman as a reader also known as the feminist critique, or as woman as a writer which is known as gynocriticism. According to Showalter, when a woman is a reader, she absorbs all the works produced by men. Hence, feminist critique focuses on how women are depicted in literary texts written by men. It studies women's characters, conditions, and experiences as written by men. It also highlights traditional misconceptions, misogyny and marginalization of women that is prevalent explicitly or implicitly in literature. Gynocriticism, on the other hand, goes beyond feminist critique. Woman no longer is a reader but becomes a writer. Showalter points out that although feminist critique is a significant kind of feminist criticism, it is limiting. If we continue to focus upon the portrayal of women in literature produced by men, we will never be able to learn about women's internal experiences and will continue to know women as seen by men.



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DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.20354938



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How to cite this article:

Gopan, G. I. (2026). Contribution of Gynocriticism to Feminist Criticism. *Journal of Research & Development*, 18(4), 116–118. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20354938>

In gynocriticism, it is the woman who creates history, text, its meaning, structure, themes, genre, and characters.

Gynocriticism no longer sees women with respect to men. Rather, it attempts to focus on unearthing and creating a tradition and sub-culture that belongs to women and is entirely about them without the influence of conventional male literary codes. Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson, editor of *Signs: Women in Culture and Society*, compares gynocriticism to New Testaments that relies upon imagination. By renouncing conventional patriarchal norms about literature, history, society, and language, gynocriticism creates a subculture that includes interactions and consciousness of women. It researches multiple fields in order to create a subculture that portrays women as their authentic self. Besides creating a subculture, gynocriticism also unearths existing solidarity and sisterhood of women that arises from their marginalization by a patriarchal society. Gynocriticism studies how women have incorporated myths of Amazon, and secluded female societies in various literary works since the Victorian age till the contemporary period.

Showalter also mentions four significant American feminist scholars who have attempted to explore new ways to study and understand 19th century female culture through literature. Out of the four gynocritics, three are social historians. Showalter mentions *Carroll Smith-Rosenberg* for her path-breaking scholarship of women's gender and history in the United States. Her article titled "The Female World of Love and Ritual" published in the first volume and issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1975), explores the society and emotions through numerous archived letters between women. *Nancy Falik Cott* is the second gynocritic whom Showalter mentions for her book '*The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England (1780-1835)*'. This book focuses on solidarity and the sisterhood that develops among women through their shared exploitation and cultural bondage. Showalter also mentions *Ann Douglas* who is another significant gynocritic known for '*The Feminization of American Culture*'. In this work, Douglas explores and traces the development of American mass-culture that is found in women's sentimental literature and clergymen. The fourth American gynocritic is *Nina Auerbach* known for '*Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*' (1978). This book explored the bonds of women through the fictions of Louisa May Alcott and Elizabeth Gaskell, Muriel Spark, Sylvia Plath, and Dorothy Sayers.

According to Showalter, these gynocritical works by feminist scholars are extremely significant for a complete development of feminist literary theory. Several irrelevant factors shape and impact women's literature. Showalter mentions how Cora Kaplan introduces Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the latter's novel '*Aurora Leigh*', as a romantic and bourgeois feminist who relies upon the transformational powers of love, Christianity, and art. Interestingly, Kaplan is unable to take note of and mention one of the most significant factors that must have impacted Barrett Browning's writing -- Robert Browning. Since women are more affected by the value systems and male traditions, and constantly have to seek male approval, literature produced by them is naturally shaped by factors that are directly irrelevant to art. Gynocriticism attempts to understand the framework of women's subculture and helps us to find and establish connections within a tradition. Without placing women's literature alongside their internal, social and political history, we are bound to misread and misunderstand literary meanings, themes and structures of their work. For Nightingale, pain was the very essence of the feminist awakening and was the driving force of any progressive change. It is better to struggle and suffer to gain some authority and autonomy as a female writer than to remain complacent as in the case of Victorian women.

Pain and suffering have been one of the most prominent themes of women's literature, and have been consumed by both men and women as a literary commodity. Popular novels such as '*Mill on the Floss*', '*The House of Mirth*', '*The Story of an Animal Farm*', have plots that find fulfillment only when a male mourner visits the grave of a female protagonist. Similarly, in novels such as '*Down Among the Women*', and '*Female Friends*' by Fay Weldon, suicide by the female protagonist becomes a central theme. On the other hand, in the novel '*The Driver's Seat*' by Muriel Spark, the female protagonist Lise goes as far as pursuing a misogynist psychopath and persuades him to murder her. One might assume that such examples of self-destructive and tragic novels might be the result of women's personal issues. However, this assumption ignores the possibility that such self-destructive and tragic worlds might be the only ones available for women, and their self-destructive responses might be necessary and justifiable. Gynocriticism takes into account this possibility. According to Showalter, women's literature must go beyond the themes of compromise, death, madness, and suffering. Although pain is an inevitable element of feminist growth and progress, women's literature must also begin to write about the world beyond it. Fortunately, women's literature has now begun to place the pain of feminist awakening in the past. For example, '*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*' challenges the popular and common rejection of mothers by their daughters disguised as feminist awakening. Gynocriticism attempts to recover from this prevalent 'matrophobia' (a term coined by the American poet Lynn Sukenick). Just as the death of a father was a significant event in a male protagonist, the loss of a mother is considered just as impactful in a female protagonist's life. Literary works such as '*Surfacing*' by Margaret Atwood, and '*Kinflicks*' by Lisa Alther are some popular examples.

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Journal of Research and Development

A Multidisciplinary International Level Referred and Double Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access

ISSN : 2230-9578 | Website: <https://jrdrv.org> Volume-18, Issue-4| April-2026

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