



Gynocriticism in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* by Adrienne Rich

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Abstracts:

Feminist literary criticism has been spreading widely just like female writers in the contemporary time. Rich's poem *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* depicts female's life which is also divided just like the snap shots. This research paper is depicting the application of Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism in Rich's *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* which is also talking about the female as the writer. The paper shows how it is a work of art by a female, for a female as it is an interaction between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. The three phases 'feminine, feminist and female' given by Elaine Showalter is also reflected in Adrienne Rich's poem by the researcher. The conversation done between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is presented in the poem. The phases of imitation, revolt and self-discovery are given as three phases of female literary history by Elaine Showalter which is critically analyzed with the close reading of poem by researcher in Rich's poem *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*. Even the concepts of Gynocriticism are depicted from between the lines in this poem.

Keywords: Gynocriticism, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*, imitation, protest, self-discovery, Rich, Showalter.



Introduction:

Criticism is a very broad umbrella in itself under which many things fall. Feminist criticism or feminism is one of those many layers of criticism. Not being a very ancient type of criticism, feminism has been entered into academic criticism just a century before or around. But this path has many writers and critic constantly working for its development. One such figure known as the feminist critic is Elaine Showalter. She is one of the important feminist critics from America. She has also written on cultural and social issues. She has written many important works such as *A Literature of Their Own*, *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, *Feminist Criticism in the wilderness*, and many more. From all of them this research paper will focus on the concept of Gynocriticism and the three different phases of feministic development given in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* in 1979 by Showalter. The research will also take into account the views of Toril Moi on the views upon the Views of Elaine Showalter's Criticism. The writer on whose poem the theory of Showalter applied is applied in this research paper is American poetess named Adrienne Rich. It is said that Rich is "one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century". Her famous and celebrated poems are *Diving into the Wreck*, *A Mark of Resistance*, *Storm Warnings*, *Aunt Jennifer's Tiger*, *Orion*, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* and many more. from all these the poem being discussed in this paper is *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*. This poem is divided into ten parts just like snapshots of life presented in the different length.

Gynocriticism in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*:

Before directly plunging into the analysis of the poem, researcher would like to give the brief idea of 'Gynocriticism' as is discussed by Showalter and Moi.

Gynocriticism:

There are two forms of feminist critics given by Elaine Showalter. The first type which she gives is of 'Feminist Critique' and the other one is 'Gynocritics'. The first one is the writing of male about female where women are playing the role of a reader. But the second one gynocriticism is where women become the writer and woman writes about women. Toril Moi



has written on page number 75 of *Sexual/ Textual Politics*, “The feminist critic, in other words, must realize that the woman-produced text will occupy a totally different status from a ‘male’ text.”

Toril Moi has also pinned Showalter’s following lines in her book, “One of the problems of the feminist critique is that its male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what men have thought women should be. (27)” (pp. 75). On the same page Moi writes from Showalter’s text that “‘Gynocritics’ frees itself from pondering to male values and seeks to ‘focus... on the newly visible world of female culture. (28)’” (pp. 75). The main focus of gynocritics is to study the female experiences rather than adopting to the male models and theories. They prominently work to construct a female framework for the analysis of female literature in contrast to angry or loving fixations on male literature. “Gynocritics begin when we free ourselves from the linear way of male history.” It is completely a female framework by a woman for a woman. Females need to stop trying to be fit in the lines of male critics and they should focus on their own world where they are giving their views on themselves.

Along with the concept of Gynocriticism, Showalter is also dividing the history of women’s literature into three parts historically. This is done by her in her work *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. The three phases on women literature given by Showalter are Feminine, Feminist and Female phase. The first part is covering 1840 to 1880 where females were mostly trying to equal the efforts of intellectual achievements with males. So, we can say that in this first phase, female was trying to match male or imitate the achievements of male. Thus, it can be called the imitation phase. The second phase is during 1880 to 1920. It shows the protest of females against male standards and the fight for themselves. The last, third phase is that of self-discovery going on from 1920 onwards. Here female rejects both the upper concepts of imitation and protest. They are now turning towards their own feministic literature and culture, making their own new and autonomous identity by discovering themselves. This research paper will show how the concept of Gynocriticism and these three phases of development of female literature can be applied in the poem *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* by Adrienne Rich.



Application in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law:

The very title of the poem contains a female character. The character chosen is such who is highly under the patriarchal society under the control of men (first father and then the husband). We can see in the poem that the whole poem is a conversation between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. It means that the poem is written by a woman for a woman and is also addressed to a woman. As it is woman talking to woman it becomes a work of gynocriticism. The poem shows women's works and deeds not through men's authoritative eyes but via women's empirical and experienced eyes. Neither any connection among these ten snapshots nor chronology is found in the structure or content of the poem. There is no women voice directly recorded by Feminist critiques. It is written in a complaining ode in the sixth snapshot where Adreinne wrote, "neither words nor music are her own".

The poem has all three phases of the history of women's literature. It begins with the image of woman as a caged bird in marriage. The poem ends in the tenth snapshot of freedom saying that now the women will come who (future woman) will discover her true self. She will be merciless to herself while following the path of self-discovery and self-realisation. She will be fearless, self-confident, and responsible who will be able to prove herself capable enough for the moder world. Rich's line 'Her fine blades making the air wince.' Suggests such a lady from the third phase known as self-discovery. Such a lady would be able to do everything and face every challenge in this world.

First comes the feminine phase which is mainly related with the imitation of men or a try to get equal intellection values as those of men. This phase can be seen in the poem where the daughter-in-law is imitating the behaviour of her mother-in-law. Every daughter-in-la is being the same conventional, traditional and rigid mother-in-law by imitating the lady in their own family. The beginning lines show how the behaviour is being repeated or imitated as we read these lines written by Rich, "You, once a belle in Shreverport, with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud, still have your dresses copied from that time,". In the same part one, we find the description of daughter given by poetess were daughter wipes teaspoons. The sentence is written in simple present tense which shoes that the motion is very regular for



everyday and nothing new happens in the life of daughter. Almost each day of her life is imitated and there seems to be no scope for any creative or new activity.

This concept of imitation is found also in the third snapshot where Adrienne Rich has written, “all the old knives that have rust in my back, I drive in yours”. It shows the insistence of mother-in-law who wishes her daughter-in-law to live a kind of life which she has lived. Whatever suffering she has gone through, she wishes not to change the situation but to pass on to the next generation means to her daughter-in-law. The whole fifth stanza is showing the repetition of routine where women are showing their legs until it becomes white and shiny. It shows how women were judged only by the external beauty and nothing else.

Next comes Elaine Showalter’s the second phase which shows the protest against male autonomy or a revolt of women. It is found in the arguments where daughter-in-law is hinting that some of the ways and beliefs of mother-in-law are rigid and need to be changed now. The second part or the second snapshot of the poem symbolizes the revolt when it starts with the act of banging of a coffee pot into the sink. It contains all the revolutionary, bold and brave advises like “Have no patience.....Be insatiable.... Save yourself; others you cannot save.”, etc.

We can find this revolt-oriented behaviour depicted in the fourth stanza where the passing of time is depicted where Rich has quoted Emily Dickinson’s “My life had stood- a Loaded Gun” and furthermore Rich also gives symbols of ‘iron-eyed and baked bird’ and the process of dusting which is showing the cleanliness of negativity gathered till now.

The third phase is having the ideas of self-discovery. We can find at some lines in the poem that the daughter-in-law is scrutinizing her own snapshots with their analysis. Self-questioning starts in the sixth snapshot as Rich has written, “has nature her household books to you, daughter-in-law, that her sons never saw?”. This question can be the main cause of self-discover where woman is asked for the first time about herself, her possessions and what she has in her own individuality. This leads her to think about her own unique qualities which are incomparable which anyone else. This question about self is leading to the birth of a new woman who now speaks for herself. In the seventh snapshot we find the following lines of



Rich, “Thus wrote a woman, partly brave, partly good, who fought with what she partly understood”. But the bitter reflection of society is also noted down by the poetess where she immediately tells us that those women were given a negative place in the society as the whore or shrew. They now start thinking about their passions and their own place in the society irrespective of the place of men. It can be found when Rich writes in ninth snapshots that primarily some mere talent, rough drafts and the glitters in fragments would be enough for them(women).

She is going through a self-discovery which leads her to have faith, confidence and trust to the future women. Women in future will be so brave that she will be able to handle and fight with all the situations, even the worst. She will be stronger and ‘Well, she's long about her coming, who must be more merciless to herself than history.’ She will be unstoppable with her courage and personality which is reflected in the contradiction where a woman is poised and still, she is ready to fight with all the odd situation surrounding her and stopping her growth. It is depicted by Rich in the last or tenth snapshot as, “poised, still, coming, her fine blades making the air wince”. Above line shows that though such a new woman is long about to arrive, poetess is sure of her arrival in the future. The current self-discovery phase of women will lead them to such a personality in the future.

Here are to women and daughter-in-law herself is the narrator. The concept found here is conversation of women about what men say about them. No mail voice is included in the poem actively but is used here only passively as to say ‘they say so.’.

The title itself hints at discontinued, disorderly photographs of a woman, daughter-in-law, the relation dominantly linked with son. The poem has no linear motion. It is disorderly divided in the forms of photographs where different scenes only are presented. It seems that this poem has been chosen by Adrienne Rich very Consciously in order to disclose a position of a woman who has hardly lived as an independent daughter but a dependent daughter-in-law. It is mainly about anxiety of a modern woman. Daughter-in-law is a multi-faced women-hood because she is a daughter, a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law and a to be mother-in-law in the future. It also shows the anxiety of woman after entering into a patriarchal society.



The last snapshot can be said the snapshot of freedom which is celebrating the liberty of female. It shows them as themselves, celebrating and making their own culture, history and literature. This shows the acceptance of women by themselves. The acceptance is the only way to reach to the level of self-love. After getting self-love only one can thing in the progressive terms of the life. They will then not just "promise" to deliver, but actually deliver a new millennium--her "cargo" will be women's freedom to be herself, to mould her own history. This will create a new females' canon as depicted in gynocriticism as the 'I' and the 'You' both are females in this poem.

Conclusion:

Many theories and an abundance of literary works of every genre is available in literature. While having a close analysis of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* the concepts of gynocriticism and three phases of women's history can be found logically suitable in it. the condition of females in feminine, feminist and female phase is portrayed here by respectively women's imitation of their traditional behaviours, their revolts against their ongoing scenario and at last the discovery of their selves depicted by Adrienne Rich. Also, this is a text written by a woman for other woman where the conversation is taking place between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law, both female characters which make the poem a piece of gynocriticism.



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