

INTO THE MILLENNIUM: FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the exciting work of feminist literary criticism in the last decades. Tracing the significant shift from gynocriticism to more complex theories of difference, the paper surveys and contextualizes these newer critical strategies by examining a selection of cross-cultural examples. 1985 witnessed the publication of two important books: *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, and the English translation of Luce Irigaray's *This Sex which Is not One*, which highlighted the impact of French feminism and *écriture féminine* on feminist criticism. In the decades which followed a more inclusive reassessment of difference was the undertaking of Asian, Black and Hispanic literary critics. And the problematization of gender difference was the radical theme of lesbian and queer theorists. The paper ends with reflections on what the future will be for feminist literary criticism in the millennium by examining models of current practice.

KEY WORDS: Feminist criticism, gynocriticism, difference, *écriture féminine*, lesbian theory, queer theory.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo examina la interesante crítica literaria feminista de las últimas décadas. Siguiendo el significativo cambio desde la ginocrítica hasta teorías de la diferencia más complejas, el artículo explora y contextualiza las estrategias críticas más recientes examinando una selección de ejemplos transculturales. 1985 vio la publicación de dos libros importantes: *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, y la traducción inglesa de *This Sex which Is not One* (Luce Irigaray), que subrayó el impacto del feminismo francés y de la *écriture féminine* en la crítica feminista. En las décadas siguientes, una re-evaluación más inclusiva de la diferencia fue la empresa que emprendieron críticas literarias asiáticas, negras e hispanas. Y la problematización de la diferencia genérica fue el tema principal que trataron teóricas "queer" y lesbianas. El ensayo termina reflexionando sobre el futuro de la crítica literaria feminista en el próximo milenio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: crítica feminista, ginocrítica, diferencia, *écriture féminine*, teoría lesbiana, teoría 'queer.'



INTRODUCTION

All mobilities, including literary mobilities, are gendered histories of cultural change. Contemporary feminist literary criticism moves across borders to recruit the energies of autobiography, the social polemic and graphic poetry and is acutely experimental and exciting. Why literary criticism matters is because all representations, literary or otherwise, are what make constructions of knowledge and subjectivity possible. Through representations we shape our identities and our worlds. The insights of feminist literary criticism will help us, even require us, to think about cultural identities in new ways and feminist border crossings are not simply metaphorical but grow out of a strong belief that criticism can help bring about a more equitable world.

Feminism is not simply an additive explanatory model alongside other political theories. To centralize women's experiences of sexuality, work and the family inevitably challenges traditional frameworks of knowledge. Feminism incorporates diverse ideas which share three major perceptions: that gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men; that patriarchy shapes this construction; and that women's experiential knowledge is a basis for a future non-sexist society. These assumptions inform feminism's double agenda: the task of critique (attacking gender stereotypes) and the task of construction. Without this second task (sometimes called feminist praxis) feminism has no goal.

These themes give feminism a particular interest in cultural constructions of gender, including those in literature. The cultural practices of literature are pervasive in schools, higher education and in the media. Literature produces representations of gender difference which contribute to the social perception that men and women are of unequal value. Women often become feminists by becoming conscious of, and criticizing, the power of symbolic misrepresentations of women.

Feminist literary criticism is now intimately connected with questions of difference, race, nationalism, and culture answering spectacularly the urgent strategy that Virginia Woolf first outlined in *Three Guineas* of creating an Outsiders Society which Woolf intriguingly generated from literary theory since only after the Outsider has compared "English literature with Greek literature, for translations abound" can she more famously discover "as a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (124-5).

The issue is: How do feminist literary critics escape the patterns of thought and master tools of the academy? My rather prosaic answer is to look at some key examples as well as key events which I think illustrate new literary principles and negotiations. My project is modest: to introduce and comment on the two main forms of border crossing in contemporary feminist literary criticism and on how these might help to reframe the Eurocentricism of literary studies. One of my foci is on feminist poet-criticism and on its open-ended associative intimacy with the reader which is hugely self reflexive. As a new and unnamed arm of literary feminism I am going to call this work "gynographic criticism" because it often entails an explicitly typographical performance. I also want to consider the "deterritorialization" of literature, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term, modelled by Asian, Black and



women of colour: women who have nimbly and with some courage transformed the perceptual parameters of literary theory (Deleuze and Guattari 1986).

My premise is that critical analysis helps us to understand the cultural changes at work in these difficult times. Terry Eagleton sometime claimed that the greatest English critics are frequently foreigners or outsiders to tradition and my sense of current critical writing is that feminists above all others gamble the greatest stakes in this literary wager (Eagleton 1970).

FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM FROM 1970 TO THE PRESENT

A lot of the most exciting recent work on gender and writing spins the term along paths that are not mapped in traditional literary theories. But in order to understand the genesis of that excitement we need to step back a moment to the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) to recognize the telling fact that second wave criticism began as a spatial construction, as border crossing, with its key theme "the personal is political" linking two hitherto conceptually, separately spaced worlds. What feminist literary criticism uniquely offered, and why Millett's book is so generative, is a revolutionary standpoint, not simply, or not only, new critical tools. Yet in the 1970s feminist criticism was certainly beyond the border of the traditional academy, indeed it was invisible. The 1980 edition of the *Modern Language Association Introduction to Scholarship* contains no mention of feminist criticism and Margaret Drabble in her plenary address to a conference, "Literature a Woman's Business", amusingly described Oxford University Press shocked response to her suggestion that she include feminist criticism in her new edition of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* published in 1985 (Gibaldi 1992). She did. Faced with this misogyny feminist literary criticism in the 1970s tended to define space diachronically as origin, as the significance of male or female authorship, which was the key feature of feminist criticism.

Second wave feminism is often characterized as the break with the fathers because critics such as Kate Millett, Germaine Greer and Mary Ellmann made revisionary readings of what Ellmann calls "phallic" writing (Millett 1970; Greer 1971; Ellmann 1968). Critics focused on sexist vocabulary and gender stereotypes in the work of male authors and highlighted the ways in which these writers commonly ascribe particular features, such as "hysteria" and "passivity" only to women. Judith Fetterley's influential *The Resisting Reader* (1978) symbolises this new, politically informed, approach to literary criticism. In her book Fetterley attacks the writers whose works were "canonised" in literary departments throughout America: Henry James, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner. In the 1970s feminist criticism grew into a new phase, often called gynocriticism or the study of women writers and women identified themes. Critics, including Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter, described women's literary expressions and "sub-cultures" and defined and celebrated women's literary history as a progressive tradition (Moers 1976; Showalter 1977). Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* gave shape to a tradition of women's literature. Although it was attacked in the 1980s for its partial racism, homophobia and idiosyn-



cratic choices, *Literary Women* was one of the first texts of feminist criticism to give women writers a history, describe women's choices of literary expression, and to make an identificatory celebration of the power of women writers; "There is no point saying what women cannot do in literature, for history shows they have done it all" (Moers XIII).

A constant theme in feminist writing in this period is the issue of communication, as titles of feminist books make clear: Tillie Olsen's *Silences* and Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*. The need to explore a distinctive women's language and to establish a body of literary criticism were the vital work of this decade. 1975 was also the year in which *Signs* was founded with a review of literary criticism by Elaine Showalter. A similar debate developed outside the English-speaking world: the first programmatic discussion about "Frauern Literature" took place in Germany in 1975/6; and the founding of the "Frauenoffensive" publishing house and journal represented a common concern among German feminists to explore women's "different" language and culture.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) was an important contribution to this agenda. Reflecting on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Showalter faced the similar issue of women's exclusion from the academy. Charting a long history of literary women, she brought attention to undervalued nineteenth-century writers such as Sarah Grand and George Egerton. Rather than defining a "universal" woman's text, Showalter preferred to identify a female "subculture" which created those texts. She replaced the traditional periods of literary history with an alternative three-stage process which she couched as a growth into consciousness: feminine, feminist and female. Cautioned by later critics for adopting a literary standard more applicable to the late twentieth century and for her resistance to theory, Showalter went on to develop her ideas in "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1979), "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981) and subsequent writings (1985). In these essays Showalter divided criticism into two distinct categories: the first type focused on the woman reader, a consumer of literature, and the second focused on the woman writer, a producer of textual meaning. Showalter described four models of gender difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural—and claimed that these would be best addressed by a gynocentric model of feminist criticism.

From the hindsight of the new millennium this description of difference seems implicitly binary and is caught up in the notion that women's literature is in one category, the "Other" in relation to the masculine tradition. Yet Showalter's work in this decade did offer a firm agenda for feminist criticism by describing a panoply of women's writing as a continuous and progressive narrative. Certainly gynocriticism's stress on the significance of women's literary friendships held sway during the early 1980s, evident in the continuing popularity of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and cultural feminism for example, feminists writing about the mother/daughter nexus, in *The Lost Tradition*. But it is the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar above all in the 1980s which created a feminist aesthetic from within the female literary tradition itself.



THE 1980S

The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) and their subsequent series of texts, *No Man's Land*, 3 volumes (1988), focus on some of traditional criticism's most serious exclusions: the material and psychological controls over women; women's secret lives and culture; and anxieties of masculinity and femininity represented in literary metaphors of the frontier, the visual, the domestic and cross-dressing. Gilbert and Gubar built on Moers and Showalter's acts of retrieval and, like those critics, are passionate about the oppositional function of women's writing. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, appearing nine years after Millett's *Sexual Politics*, is a compelling display of interwoven discourses. It includes a close textual analysis of the work of Jane Austen, the Brontes, Emily Dickinson and George Eliot, combined with psychohistory and medical and historical analyses. Like *Sexual Politics*, *Madwoman* is basically a revisionist history taking an existing model: the androcentric paradigm described by Harold Bloom that literary sons suffer an anxiety of authorship and Oedipal struggle with male precursors: to show that women write in confrontation with culture and with themselves by creating an author's double, the madwoman in the attic. In *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar moved on from *Madwoman's* gynocritical focus which was in part shaped by a notion of patriarchal culture as a homogenous and uniformly repressive entity. As the title suggests, all three volumes argue that twentieth-century literary history is a history of sexual conflict, and Gilbert and Gubar's great achievement is to catalogue in full the repetitive sexual imagery (of rape and impotence) which dominate modernist writing by men. *No Man's Land* fosters a more pluralist feminist criticism than the singular psychoanalytic model of *Madwoman*. Gilbert and Gubar discuss how lesbian expatriates in Paris "reinvented gender"; they explore the consumerism of the Gilded Age in an informed materialist analysis and describe the sexual imagery of imperialism. *No Man's Land* is sustained by a postmodern conviction that "male" and "female" are fictive constructs variously shaped by cultures.

One of the great achievements of Anglo-American feminist criticism in the 1980s was its ability to identify and conduct a very diverse gendered literary criticism. Feminist criticism proved firstly that literature was not simply a collection of great texts but was deeply structured by social/sexual ideologies, and secondly that certain preoccupations and techniques predominate in women's writing in relation to those social structures. Of course there were problems with the politics of pluralism. The vigorous debate in the pages of *Feminist Studies* about Annette Kolodny's prize-winning essay, "Dancing Through the Minefield" (1980), revealed how lesbian, Third World and working-class feminists could see the heterosexist and racist assumptions which pluralism covered over (Gardiner et al.). Yet what is also clear now about that decade is the innovative and self-conscious rapprochement that was taking place between feminist criticism and feminist writing in the work of Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich. Feminist criticism was now married to feminist creative writing in a rich terrain of autobiographies, fictional narratives and poetic histories. And it is not insignificant for the future direction of feminist criticism in the late 1980s into theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism



that Sandra Gilbert was the American editor of Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement's *The Newly Born Woman*.

In the 1980s Gilbert and Gubar's theme of a woman's anxiety of authorship is given shape in the first deconstructive text of feminist criticism, Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). Only six years separate the publication of these works by Gilbert and Gubar and Moi but during that period the writings of the French feminists, the linguistic philosopher Jacques Derrida and poststructuralists had begun to inform Western feminist criticism. Moi gives a summary and analysis of the main kinds of Anglo-American and French criticism, but, Eurocentrically, refused to consider Black writing.

The key feminist focus in this work of the late 1980s was on language. The challenge was, by interrogating the relation between gender identity and language, to refigure the powerful and sexually expressive relationships between language, literary forms and women's and men's psyches. French feminist critics adopted the term *écriture féminine* to describe a feminine style (which was equally available to both men and women). They discovered this "style" in absences, ruptures and "jouissances" in modernist writing. Cixous, in particular, argues that *écriture féminine* is to be found in metaphors of female sexuality and women's genital and libidinal differences. French feminists' determination to break through patriarchal critical practices by creating new forms of writing/thinking which could not be described as the "other" half of male-defined rationality inspired excitement and debate. Cixous and Irigaray laid claim to a repressed sexuality which created ways of thinking lying mute in patriarchy. Julia Kristeva identified this new feminine language as "the semiotic" which she defines as the pre-Oedipal language of the mother and infants (see Humm 1994).

Deconstruction, in particular, appears sophisticated and potentially revolutionary because it attacks linguistic binary oppositions between men and women. However, deconstruction can also evade the real practical and theoretical differences between white and Black feminists and white and Black lesbian feminists. Barbara Christian exposed the reactionary assumptions underlying the American academy's wholesale embrace of critical theory in the 1980s. The "race for theory", she argued, further marginalised feminists outside the academy, frequently Black and/or lesbian women.

BLACK FEMINISMS

From the mid 1980s racial difference became a key focus for feminist criticism as white feminists at last addressed the absences in their own processes of critical selection and commentary. It was Audre Lorde who posed the provocative question: can we create a useful feminist criticism with the methods and forms of language we inherit from "the master's house" (Lorde 1984).

In addition, as Barbara Christian complained, Black women are "tired of being asked to produce a Black feminist literary theory as if I were a mechanical man". Christian pushed the theoretical debate further by pointing out that "peo-



ples of color have always theorized but in forms quite different from our Western form of abstract logic... in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs.” (53) The Black critical tradition that Christian describes began with Alice Walker’s work in *Ms* (1974) and with Barbara Smith’s groundbreaking essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977); and it continued in the first American anthology about Black women writers, *Sturdy Black Bridges* (1979), as well as in collections co-edited by Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull, 1982) (the first anthology of Black women’s studies) and *Home Girls* (1983) which focuses on Black lesbian writing. Several themes emerged in these texts: the ways in which extra-literary folk traditions and spirituality influence Black writing; the significance of mother/daughter relationships and varieties of female bonding in Black writing which are replicated in the close relationships between Black readers/critics/writers.

Building on this work Black feminist criticism of the late 1980s and 1990s [for example, Majorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers (ed.) *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and the Literary Tradition* (1985) and Joanne Braxton and Andrea McLaughlin (ed.) *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* (1990)] began to create a Black aesthetic. These works and many others retrieved Black women’s lost texts, placed these in history, described myths and women’s traditions which proved that Black narratives, while not necessarily wanting to be like poststructuralism, could be said to be more akin to poststructuralism than many white critical texts. In other words, Black criticism was not simply a self-naming distinctive or essentially “other” school or method alongside white criticism but was transforming the whole agenda of feminist criticism.

LESBIAN FEMINISM AND QUEER THEORY

Similar crucial and valuable feminist critiques at the end of the decade were the projects and explorations of lesbian critics, white and Black. The critique of heterosexism in literary criticism, the recovery of lost lesbian writing and the search for a lesbian aesthetic, or queer theory, are the extensive work of critics Bonnie Zimmerman, Audre Lorde, Teresa de Lauretis and Adrienne Rich, among others. Lesbian feminist criticism opened up the field of feminist criticism as a whole.

THE 1990S

The next step into the 1990s was perhaps predictable. The questions raised by the theoretical ferment of the 1980s and by the revelations of Black and lesbian critics led to a reshaping of critical identity which emerged as gender theory. This more recent development on the critical horizon presented feminist criticism both with new possibilities and new problems. Elaine Showalter’s career is a good example here. Showalter moved on from forceful accounts of a women’s literary tradition at the end of the 1980s to a focus on gender studies with the publication of *Speaking of Gender* (1989). In that volume, Showalter claimed that feminist criti-



cism had finished with her own gynocriticism and needed to focus on gender and sexual difference in texts by men as much as by women.

Gender studies opened up the possibility that feminist literary criticism could respond to gender theories in other disciplines for example, in science (Evelyn Fox Keller) or history (Joan Scott), and could also retrieve homosexual literature from the margins of literary analysis. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* argued convincingly that representations of homosexuality could not be understood outside of their relation to women and to the gender system itself. Drawing on feminist theory of the 1980s, Sedgwick asked what theoretical framework could link sexual relations and power relations. Her answer was to recruit "the representational finesse of deconstructive feminism" (12). For example, Sedgwick treats representations of homophobia as tools for understanding the gender system as a whole. While Sedgwick's work challenged feminist criticism to explore how constructions of homosexuality are conjoined with misogynist constructions in general, gender studies as a practice, separated itself from what has to be a fundamental aim of any feminist cultural work: what contribution can literary criticism make to feminist projects? As Tania Modleski incisively argues, such work is based on two fundamental and totally fallacious assumptions: one a heterosexual "presumption" and the second an assumption of the "equality between men and women" (6). In this respect the appropriations of gender theory seem a retrograde entry into the 1990s. Yet, as Joan Kelly-Gadol pointed out long ago, women cannot unproblematically adopt the decade constructs of linear "masculine" history (1992). For example, Italian feminist semioticians engaged in a highly complex theoretical debate about women's language. The Milanese group, Libreria delle donne (Women's Bookshop), devotes itself to a systematic analysis of mothering discourses (Bono and Kemp 1991).

Finally by focusing on autobiography as I shall show, and on themes of place and displacement, critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Gayatri Spivak brought feminist criticism into the post-colonial, postmodern world (Anzaldúa 1987; Spivak 1990). So how to figure this continual movement out of the safe enclave of traditional criticism into gynographic and postcolonial criticisms, this intense and constant desire to cross literary borders? Of course I am not arguing that the political importance of a text can be read off its form in some simple way nor that experimental writing is more radical than realistic writing but this continual reworking of the borders between different power positions of vocabulary can subvert traditional literary theory. One major way in which feminism has reconstituted knowledge is precisely through language change with the invention of new terms like 'sexism'. While experimental self-perceptions are not always politically progressive, they do floodlight a different critical map than the current academic devotion to pseudo philosophical theory. For example Nicole Ward Jouve's *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue* sets in play a dizzying dialogue between Jouve's aunt and Simone de Beauvoir (Jouve 1991). De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* apparently stopped the aunt from watering her horse chestnut trees because the book had triggered a family argument about whether women could piss standing up and the exasperated aunt was unable to hold a hose-pipe ever again. Crossing the boundary of literary theory



into autobiography takes many different forms from Audre Lorde's "biomythography" which describes the complex mother/myth/biographies of some lesbian identities; to Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock "cultural autobiography" a kind of autobiographical community; and Gayatri Spivak's "regulative psychobiography" which is a form of multilayered cultural criticism (Lorde 1982; Reagon 1982; Spivak 1990).

Nancy Miller's gynographic *Getting Personal* braids Woolf, Anzaldúa and Greek myth into a narrative which includes Miller's failure in French, the size of her apartment, even the size of her father's penis. Miller deliberately stages her essays as a graphic performance, by questioning the traditional border between the public world of the academy and her private room through typographical contrasts between italics, bold and lower case typography. Miller's choice of inferior and superior typography is very revealing in the disjunction between the self deprecating autobiography of the conference critic "to be sure, as the morning unfolded none of the speakers threw her paper away - I clung to mine for dear life but rarely have I wished so intensely to jump ship and go home" which is printed in hugely affirmative italics (94). But by crossing the boundary between traditional academic objectivity and her own emotions, Miller sharpens our sense of the absence of women's emotional discourses in traditional academic life. This strong investment in making graphic marks, particularly italics, ellipses and hyphens, acts as a powerful and exemplary tool of struggle and is very vivid in post-colonial and lesbian critiques.

A spectacular postmodern exponent of gynographic criticism is the American poet Rachel Blau Du Plessis. Her early and startling essay "For The Etruscans" is extraordinarily heterogeneous, ranging over contemporary feminism's major concerns: educational discrimination, the power of women's language and is a daring combination of poetry, diary excerpts together with literary criticism, and Etruscan history (1992). The Etruscans are a grand metaphor for the exclusion of women's meaning-making from the literary canon. The Etruscan script, like women's writing is known in the sense that its vocabulary has been translated but we lack knowledge about the social and private contexts which give it meaning.

In each of these critical essays there is a doubling and splitting of time and space in the graphic organisation. Characterized by the non-linear multidisciplinary mixing of diaries and historical accounts, gynographic criticism explores connections between gendered structures of feeling and "public" historical events in an open-ended way, embodying momentum, a desire to dialogue with reader and subject, in a contingent openness to others.

POST-COLONIAL FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

The second flamboyant example of border creativity comes from writers who have some personal and historical experience of colonial borders. Gloria Anzaldúa, the Chicana feminist poet-critic, places her multilingual criticism on the borders of Mexico and Texas where she was born. Her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a rich exploration of Chicano history, writing and myth (1987). The title refers



both to the place and to the form of critical writing in a postmodern mixture of poetry and criticism. What Anzaldúa achieves here, and in her later anthology *Making Face, Making Soul*, is a performance of different identities continually remaking the boundaries between these TexMex, lesbian and academic identities through a montage of poetry, myth, autobiography and history. As Anzaldúa suggests the “listener/reader is forced into participating in the making of meaning - she is forced to connect the dots” (*Making* XVIII).

The energy of Anzaldúa’s border writing comes from the effort to map an autobiographical and critical journey from her life as a migrant farmworker to a Chicana lesbian feminist academic but also from Anzaldúa’s choice of contrapuntal non synchronic form. For example: “my soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else” (*Borderlands* 73).

In Britain these energies are often to be found outside the routinely academic. Akua Rugg’s *Brickbats and Bouquets* was the first volume of criticism by a Black woman in Britain and sets a propulsive tone for the rhetorical potency which I am calling border crossing (Rugg 1984). Rugg came to Britain from Lagos and the volume is a collection of her reviews for *Race Today* written in an engaging personal voice with its Black slang “rapping”. The scripto-centric focus of academic criticism is more energetically denied by Ogundipe-Leslie in her special edition of *Research in African Literature* “Women as Oral Artists” (Ogundipe-Leslie and Boyce Davis 1994). Ogundipe-Leslie has taught in Nigeria and American universities and argues that criticism must cross the borders of literature to look at culture as “the total product of a people’s ‘being’” (“African woman” 81).

The anthology focuses on feminine forms for example birth songs and the popular Kiganda radio songs. Ogundipe-Leslie debunks two major assumptions of traditional criticism: that men dominate African significations and that African women did not have a voice or space until they began writing in Roman script (Ogundipe-Leslie and Boyce Davis 1994). In her own earlier and fabulous example of critical border crossing, Ogundipe-Leslie attacks traditional criticism even more directly by writing “The Nigerian Literary Scene” as a long poem in the style of Pope’s heroic couplets chronicling the misogynist teaching of literature in Nigeria and sharply attacking the Nigerian writers Achebe and Soyinka:

Things fall apart
And lecturers are the most adept
at hurling the arrow of God
into the river between. (“Nigerian” 6)

Other collections for example, *Ngambika*, a reclamation of African women’s writing, and *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* both edited by Carole Boyce Davies also privilege diversity and heterogeneity by considering children’s literature alongside adult. Other experimental border crossings by Asian



feminist critics, for example the collection *Women writing in India* points to the significance of retellings of the classics by Asian women writers (Tharu and Lalita 1993). Notable examples include Vaidehi's deconstruction of the 5th century *Shakuntala* by retelling the myth from Shakuntala's point of view in order to highlight women's friendship and Sashi Deshpanda's subversion of the story of Gandheri who was married off to a blind man without her knowledge.

In her introduction to *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry* the critic Rukhsana Ahman points out that a decade ago British Asian writing had no critical attention but now after years of creative achievement Asian writing necessarily involves a border crossing of languages and cultures (Ahman 1990). What the feminist critic Uma Parameswaran calls "native aliens" are subverting the flowery traditional Urdu and Bengali poetry and "have assimilated in 30 years what it has taken the West 10 times that number of years to create" (Jena 5).

The post-colonial critic and filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha argues that walking on the edges can be hazardous (Minh-ha). There are additional hazards for a white critic not simply the paucity of material on South Asian and Black literature in public and university libraries. As the Afro-American feminist Valerie Smith pointedly suggests "the black women as critic... is often invoked when Anglo-American feminists and male Afro-Americanists begin to rematerialize their discourse" (44). Smith argues that "this association of black women with re-embodiment resembles rather closely the association, in classic Western philosophy and in nineteenth century cultural constructions of womanhood, of women of colour with the body" (45).

Of course according to the Asian American writer Maxine Hong Kingston because I am white I could be considered to be merely a teaching ghost like the white American Garbage Ghosts and Meter Reading Ghosts of *The Woman Warrior* (1976). A less immobilizing vantage point is offered by Pat Parker in "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to be My Friend": "The first thing you do is to forget that I'm Black. Second, you must never forget that I'm Black" (Abel 495).

A further issue is to question how far border crossing might be indispensably caught up in that romantic notion of the artist outsider common to *fin de siecle* moments. As Elaine Showalter suggests in *Sexual Anarchy*, at the turn of the last century women were perceived to be figures of disorder and "social or cultural marginality seems to place them on the borderlines of the symbolic order" in a society longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender (8).

THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The beginning of a new age invokes a state of mind preoccupied with metaphoric changes as in "New Labour". Feminists involved in new literary *practices* rather than simply metaphors are trying to understand the wider meanings of change. To point tentatively to some of their insights suggests alternative visions of the *purposes* of criticism: that critical evaluations can connect literary particulars with ethical concerns. The most generative feminist revisions focus on three key issues: politics, pedagogy/performance and positionality.



The first approach could be called “political criticism”. This kind of writing has a clear personal presence that invites dialogue and yet is passionately a politics of difference. Such writing often begins with political and social judgements and re-evaluates texts with a partisan, self-reflexive vision. The pre-eminent example is Toni Morrison’s dazzling *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). Morrison’s individual readings of classic American literature (Poe, Melville, Twain and Faulkner), by connecting racial realities with literary imaginations, decolonise literary criticism itself in an eloquent, compelling revision of the American canon.

The second approach could be called “pedagogic or performance criticism” which similarly tries to reach out to a wider audience. The question of *how* to study literature was not often posed at the beginning of second-wave feminism. Currently feminists are turning pedagogy itself into a process of cultural reconstruction while simultaneously deconstructing the canon. A good example is VeVe Clark’s “Talking Shop: A Comparative Feminist Approach to Caribbean Literature by Women” (1994), which utilises the Haitian *Marasa* principle comparing dyadic texts to explore and transform binaries between these. This kind of pedagogy searches out historical repetitions and paradoxes to help students and readers create their own dialectics of difference.

Finally, there is the issue of positionality addressed by border criticism. Border criticism, for example Mae Henderson’s edited collection *Borders, Boundaries and Frames* and my own earlier *Border Traffic* emphasises the different cultural codes and bi-conceptual realities often used by writers changing countries (geographical/spatial borders) or media (creative borders) (Henderson 1995, Humm 1991). I find this approach particularly suggestive for my research on Virginia Woolf’s experiences of different media: her cinema going, photography, and aesthetic writings (Humm 2002). In border criticism literature is only one among several signifying practices. For example, border criticism looks at gender performances through the visual *and* the literary to cut across the distinction between subjective and objective meanings. By destroying the idea that literary criticism is a bounded entity, feminist literary critics move on from simply identifying the ‘facts’ of literary cultures to cultural transformations. “For we (feminist) are in the unusual historical position of having come so far while the rest of society has been unable to move” (Schulman XII).



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