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The Limits of Literary Analysis: Feminist Literary Criticism and Authorial Intentionalism

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Authorial Intentionalism Death of the Author, Feminist Theory.

Abstract

This article positions feminist literary criticism within the spectrum of authorial intentionalism and anti-authorial intentionalism, probing the necessity of referencing the author versus advocating for a detachment from authorial intent. It tends to probe whether feminist literary criticism favors referring to the author, or takes for granted the ability to reconstruct the author through his/her works. Based on textual readings of the literature on the topic, this article brings closer opposing views about the ability and inability of reconstructing the author by the analyst. Those opposing views consist of traditional literary criticism which calls for referencing the author on the one hand, and the concept of the 'Death of the Author' proposed by Roland Barthes which advocates an anti-authorial theoretical shift. This article arrived at the conclusion that feminist literary criticism aims for a delicate balance between acknowledging the author's influence and embracing the 'death of the author' concept. Such a balance is crucial for a nuanced exploration of gender-related themes in literature.

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حدود التحليل الأدبي: النقد الأدبي النسوي والقصدية التأليفية

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القصدية التأليفية، موت المؤلف، النظرية النسوية.

الملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى الحديث عن النقد الأدبي النسوي بين القصدية التأليفية ومدرسة التحليل الأدبي المناهضة للقصدية التأليفية، ويحقق في الجدلية القائمة بين ضرورة العودة إلى المؤلف مقابل الدعوة إلى الانفصال عن القصد التأليفي، حيث أنه يهدف إلى استكشاف ما إذا كان النقد الأدبي النسوي يفضل العودة إلى المؤلف، أو أن القدرة على إعادة بناء المؤلف من خلال أعماله/ها أمر مستحيل. واستنادا إلى القراءات النصية للأدبيات حول هذا الموضوع، فإن هذا المقال يقرب وجهات النظر المتعارضة حول القدرة أو عدم القدرة على إعادة بناء المؤلف من قبل المحلل أو الناقد الأدبي. تتمثل هذه الآراء المتعارضة في النقد الأدبي التقليدي الذي يدعو إلى الرجوع إلى المؤلف من جهة، ومفهوم "موت المؤلف" الذي اقترحه رولان بارت والذي يدعو إلى تحول نظري مناهض للقصدية التأليفية. توصل هذا المقال إلى نتيجة مفادها أن النقد الأدبي النسوي يهدف إلى تحقيق توازن بين الاعتراف بتأثير المؤلف وتبني مفهوم "موت المؤلف" حيث يعد هذا التوازن أمرًا بالغ الأهمية لاستكشاف دقيق للموضوعات المتعلقة بالجندر في الأدب.

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1- Introduction:

In classical literary criticism, there is a tradition of reading literary texts in reference to their authors' intentions. As such, proponents of authorial intentionalism argue about the impossibility of separating the text from its respective author. However, literary criticism of the past century insists on separating the work from its author, especially when Rolan Barthes introduced 'the Death of the Author' (Barthes 148) which suggests an anti-authorial theoretical shift. Debates on authorial intentionalism and anti-authorial intentionalism have occupied the academic interest for decades. Authorial intentionalism is based on the premise that the "author's actual intentions should constrain the ways in which it is appropriate to interpret his or her works" (Huddleston 241). On the other hand, proponents of the 'intentional fallacy' claim that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 90).

Different perspectives on the ability to reconstruct an author through their writing have consistently emphasized the exclusion of certain elements from the process of interpretation. Texts inherently contain both intended and unintended meanings that can be found within the works. Additionally, elements like the author's cultural background, religious and political convictions, and gender and sexuality, while not necessarily dictating the outcome, can provide valuable insights into the author's social beliefs and realities. This article probes authorial intentionalism versus anti-authorial intentionalism with reference to feminist literary criticism. Therefore, the guiding problem for this article tends to probe whether feminist literary criticism favors referring to the author, or takes for granted the ability to reconstruct the author through his/her works.

2- Feminist Literary Criticism:

Feminist literary criticism is an important and impactful approach to analyzing literature through a gender-oriented lens. It seeks to understand how gender influences a text, particularly in terms of the portrayal and roles of women. By examining the social and cultural constructs of gender within a literary work, feminist literary criticism aims to challenge and deconstruct oppressive narratives, stereotypes, and power dynamics (Noviana 3). This approach not only sheds light on the often overlooked or marginalized stories and perspectives of women in literature, but also exposes the underlying patriarchal structures that perpetuate sexism and inequality. By utilizing feminist literary criticism, scholars and readers are able to uncover the deep-rooted biases and subtexts that may perpetuate harmful gender norms or reinforce gender-based discrimination. In doing so, feminist literary criticism opens up possibilities for reinterpreting texts and creating a more inclusive and equitable literary landscape.

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As a by-product of the feminist movements, feminist literary criticism provides a platform for the voices of women to be heard and challenges traditional notions of gender roles and stereotypes present in literature. It aims to give women agency and representation within the literary canon, while also highlighting and critiquing patriarchal systems of power that often dominate literary works. Overall, the aim of feminist literary criticism is to promote a more nuanced and egalitarian understanding of gender in literature, and ultimately contribute to broader social change and gender equality. Feminist literary criticism plays a crucial role in identifying and challenging gender biases within literature, advancing the voices and perspectives of women, and promoting a more inclusive and equal society. Overall, the aim of feminist literary criticism is to analyze and critique the portrayal of gender in literature, with a focus on exposing and challenging oppressive narratives, stereotypes, and power imbalances. Through feminist literary criticism, the goal is to bring attention to and dismantle patriarchal structures within literature, allowing for a more diverse and inclusive representation of women and a more equitable portrayal of gender dynamics.

Feminist literary criticism, emerging to prominence in the 1960s, operates as a crucial analytical framework that employs feminist theories to unveil and critique the embedded patriarchal ideologies within literary texts and broader cultural productions. This critical approach employs meticulous methods of analysis and interpretation, aiming to illuminate and scrutinize the representations of women within the fictional realm. Simultaneously, it delves into the historical oversight and exclusion of female writers, revealing the persistent influence of patriarchal ideologies in shaping literary canons (Bell 1).

The crux of feminist literary criticism lies in its commitment to exploring the multifaceted ways in which literature and cultural productions either perpetuate or challenge the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson 83). The examination is not confined solely to the portrayal of female characters within fictional narratives but extends to the broader socio-cultural landscape, highlighting the systemic biases that have historically marginalized women. According to Annete Kolodny:

> *What unites and repeatedly invigorates feminist literary criticism ... is neither dogma nor method but an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed or (encoded) within our literary inheritance [and] the consequences of that encoding for women – as characters, as reader, and as writers (qtd. in Bressler 144).*

Feminist criticism adopts diverse aims and methodologies, all united in their overarching focus on the pervasive impact of patriarchal ideology on the act of writing itself. This critical lens thus serves as a powerful tool for not only dissecting and understanding the intricate dynamics between gender and literature but also for

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advocating a more inclusive and egalitarian literary landscape that recognizes and amplifies the voices of women. In essence, feminist literary criticism stands as a vigilant guardian, compelling readers and scholars alike to question and challenge the deeply ingrained structures that have perpetuated gender inequalities in literature and culture for centuries.

3- Feminine, Feminist and Female Critique:

The field of studying the history and development of feminist literary criticism is referred to as gynocritics. Gynocriticism, a term coined by the American literary critic and feminist Elaine Showalter, is a field dedicated to examining the history and evolution of women's writings. Introduced in her essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979), the term encapsulates a form of feminist literary criticism focused on women as writers, in contrast to earlier feminist critiques that primarily addressed women as readers—entailing the evaluation of male writers.

Emerging during the second wave of feminism, gynocriticism aims to recognize the significance of sexual differences and the unique characteristics of women's writing. Showalter contends that earlier feminist critiques suffered from a male-oriented and male-centric bias, leading to the neglect of women's experiences and emotions. By overlooking these aspects, traditional feminist criticism often inadvertently perpetuates the discussion of women as victims. Showalter underscores the need for a shift in focus to fully appreciate and understand women's perspectives within literary analysis:

> *In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture (Showalter 217).*

Showalter emphasizes the necessity of establishing a female literary tradition, outlining three distinct stages in the construction of the history of English women's writing. These stages are identified as the Feminine, Feminist, and Female stages (217). The Feminine stage, spanning from 1840 to 1880, is characterized by women's efforts to equal the achievements of male culture. During this period, there was a focus on speculations about female nature (217). Notably, this phase was marked by the use of male pseudonyms, with English writer Mary Ann Evans being a prominent example, known by her pseudonym George Eliot.

The Feminist phase, spanning from 1880 to 1920, aligns with the fulfillment of women's right to vote and the conclusion of first-wave feminism. During this period,

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women gained the ability "to reject accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood" (217). This phase is characterized by women's writings that expressed disapproval of phallocentrism and actively rebelled against it. Unlike the writers of the Feminine phase, those in the Feminist phase not only advocated for women's rights, values, and freedom but also aimed to spotlight "the harsh and often cruel treatment of female characters at the hand of their more powerful male creations" (Bressler 152).

In the ongoing Female phase, which has persisted since 1920, women rejected the two forms of dependency observed in the earlier phases—those involving imitation and protest. Instead of replicating male models or reacting against them, the Female phase focused on creating autonomous art rooted in female experience. Consequently, the emphasis shifted from exposing misogyny in male texts to "the rediscovery of women's texts and women" (Guerin et al. 225). This extension of feminist analysis into literature encompassed considerations of techniques and forms. Prominent writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, representing the 'formal Female Aesthetic,' engaged in contemplating the intricacies of both male and female sentences and language. They, therefore, undertook the task of "dividing their work into 'masculine' journalism and 'feminine' fictions, redefining and sexualizing external and internal experience" (Showalter 218).

4- Authorial Intentionalism:

In the ongoing debate about authorial intention in literary interpretation, proponents of authorial intentionalism argue that understanding and considering the author's intent is crucial for properly interpreting and analyzing a literary work. They believe that the author's intention provides valuable insights into the themes, meanings, and messages conveyed in the text. Therefore, proponents of such a stance argue that the "author's actual intentions should constrain the ways in which it is appropriate to interpret" a text (Huddleston 241). By understanding the author's intention, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the context and purpose behind the work, allowing for a more nuanced and accurate interpretation of its various elements. On the other hand, opponents of authorial intentionalism argue that relying too heavily on the author's intention can limit the scope of interpretation and neglect the multifaceted nature of literary works. They assert that the focus should be on the text itself, as it contains its own inherent meaning that can be explored through close reading and analysis. Some scholars aim to strike a balance between these perspectives, suggesting that while authorial intention should be considered, it should not be the sole determinant of interpretation. In summary, proponents of authorial intentionalism argue that considering the author's intent is crucial for understanding and interpreting a literary work, while opponents believe that the focus should be on the text itself, independent of the author's intentions.

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The Role of Authorial Intention in Interpretation is a complex and debated topic within the realm of literary analysis. Many scholars argue that understanding and considering the author's intent is essential for properly interpreting and analyzing a literary work. They believe that the author's intention provides valuable insights into the themes, meanings, and messages conveyed in the text. By understanding the author's intention, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the context and purpose behind the work, allowing for a more nuanced and accurate interpretation of its various elements. On the other hand, there are those who dismiss the significance of authorial intention in interpretation, suggesting that it is not necessary or even desirable to rely solely on the author's intention when interpreting a literary work.

Anti-authorial intentionalists argue that the text itself, independent of the author's intentions, should be the primary focus of interpretation, as it contains its own inherent meaning that can be uncovered through close reading and analysis. Thus, hypothetical intentionalism takes optimal hypotheses about authorial intention, rather than actual authorial intention, to provide the key to the central meaning of literary works (Nannicelli 408,409). Authorial intentionalism posits that understanding the author's intent is crucial for accurately interpreting a literary work, while anti-intentionalists argue that it is not necessary to consider authorial intention and that the focus should solely be on the text itself. Thus, interpreting a text is an intricate process that can go awry of its intended meanings and, therefore,

> *Modest actual intentionalism maintains that the meaning of a work is determined by the intention of the artist insofar as that intention is consistent with the way the work is. That is, the authorial intention that determines the meaning of the artwork must be compatible with what the reader, viewer, or listener can discern in the work, even if only after she has been apprised of what the author intended (Carroll qtd. in Nannicelli 409).*

According to the above view, the artist's intent is crucial in understanding the meaning of a work, but it is not a purely subjective or arbitrary interpretation. The author's intention matters, but only insofar as it is reflected or evident in the work itself. The interpretation is constrained by the observable content of the artwork. This approach suggests that the artist's intention is not the sole determinant of meaning; rather, it must harmonize with the elements and qualities actually present in the work, as perceived by the audience.

5- Death of the Author:

'The Death of the Author' theory by Roland Barthes continues to have a profound impact on literary and cultural studies, challenging traditional notions of authorship and opening up new possibilities for interpretation and meaning. The essay, first published in

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1968, sparked a significant shift in the way scholars approached texts, emphasizing the role of the reader and the context. It argues against traditional criticism that aims to focus on the author's intent to gain the 'ultimate meaning' of a text. Barthes opposes the approach to reading and criticism that depends on elements of an author's identity to extract meaning from their work. In the criticized method, the author's experiences and biases are considered the ultimate 'explanation' of the text. Barthes contends that although this method may seem neat and practical, it is fundamentally hasty and flawed. According to him, attributing a text to an author and assigning a singular interpretation to it "is to impose a limit on that text" (Barthes 147).

Barthes argues that once a text is created and released to the public, the author's intentions and personal identity should not limit or dictate the interpretation of the work. Instead, he advocates for the autonomy of the text and encourages readers to derive meaning independently of the author's intentions. Barthes contends that focusing on the author's biography or intentions can limit the richness of interpretation and hinder the emergence of multiple, valid readings of a text. He states, "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147).

Barthes' perspective challenges the traditional view that the author's biography and intentions are essential for understanding a literary work. This idea has been influential in various fields, including literary criticism, cultural studies, and postmodern theory. In the context of textual analysis, scholars often refer to Barthes' 'Death of the Author' to emphasize the importance of considering a text independently of the author's intentions. For instance, a literary critic might argue that a particular interpretation is valid because it draws on the text itself rather than relying on information about the author's life or intentions. Thus, Barthes calls for a radical shift and argues that "We know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 148).

It is important to note that while the 'Death of the Author' concept has been influential, it is not without its critics and has sparked debates within literary and cultural theory. Some argue that completely divorcing a text from its author can neglect valuable context and layers of meaning. Nevertheless, Barthes' essay remains a key text in discussions about the nature of authorship and interpretation in literature.

6- 'Écriture Feminine': Authorial Intent and Gender Identity:

Écriture féminine, or "feminine writing," represents a groundbreaking feminist literary concept that emerged in the intellectual landscape of the 1970s, largely through the work of French theorists Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. This approach to literature seeks to redefine and challenge established norms, aiming to carve out a space for a distinctly feminine voice within the realm of writing.

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One key aspect of écriture féminine is its emphasis on the fluid and sensual use of language. Writers engaging in this form of expression reject conventional, rigid structures in favor of a more intuitive and associative style. This linguistic fluidity is seen as a departure from the often prescriptive and linear structures that have historically been associated with male-dominated literary traditions.

Embodiment is another central theme within écriture féminine. This approach explores the experiences of women through the lens of the physical body, viewing it as a source of knowledge and creativity. These challenges historical trends in literature that have objectified or idealized the female body, offering a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of women's lived experiences.

The rejection of "phallogocentrism" is a critical element of écriture féminine. Coined by Cixous and Kristeva, this term refers to the privileging of male perspectives and modes of expression in language and culture. Feminine writing seeks to dismantle this inherent bias, asserting the validity and importance of women's voices in shaping both literary and societal discourses.

Expressing desire and sexuality is a potent component of écriture féminine. This form of writing endeavors to articulate women's desires, experiences, and sexuality in ways that diverge from traditional male-centric representations. It delves into the complexities of women's relationships, offering narratives that challenge and expand upon established norms.

Breaking linguistic boundaries is a fundamental goal of écriture féminine. By departing from traditional linguistic structures and norms, this concept seeks to create new forms of expression that authentically reflect women's experiences and perspectives. It challenges linguistic conventions that may perpetuate gender inequalities and strives to introduce alternative linguistic frameworks.

While écriture féminine has significantly contributed to the feminist discourse in literary theory, it has not been without controversy. Critics argue that it may risk essentializing women's experiences and potentially excluding diverse voices. Nevertheless, the concept has played a pivotal role in broadening discussions about gender, language, and representation in literature, and writers associated with écriture féminine continue to influence and inspire contemporary feminist literary exploration.

7- Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author: Towards a Paradigm Shift:

The relationship between feminist literary criticism and authorial intention is intricate and nuanced. In traditional literary analysis, the author's intent typically holds significant sway in interpreting a text. Nevertheless, feminist literary criticism challenges and broadens this relationship, particularly when exploring gender issues, power dynamics, and the portrayal of women in literature. Feminist critics acknowledge the

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significance of authorial intention, recognizing that a writer's conscious or unconscious biases can influence how gender is depicted in a text. They may delve into the author's intent to uncover implicit biases, challenge stereotypes, or emphasize subversive messages related to gender roles. Scrutinizing authorial intention enables feminist critics to critique and dismantle the ways in which literature mirrors or reinforces societal norms and expectations regarding gender.

Simultaneously, feminist literary criticism does not rely exclusively on authorial intention. Scholars in this field acknowledge that texts do not emerge in isolation; they are shaped by broader cultural, historical, and societal contexts. In this context, prominent feminist theorist Elaine Showalter argues that for a feminist criticism that refuses to establish the limits of the feminine, the easiest and most appropriate stance is to deny the finality of authorship (Showalter 216-217). Additionally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that feminist readings must be made where the texts have no known authors, no names, but to close the author out is a form of collaboration (Spivak, 2014).

Therefore, while considering the author's intent, feminist critics also explore how external factors contribute to shaping a literary work. This approach aims to reveal not only the author's personal perspective but also the impact of societal norms and power structures on the representation of gender in literature. Therefore, the relationship between feminist literary criticism and authorial intention involves a dynamic interplay. Feminist critics navigate between recognizing the autonomy of the text and considering the author's intent, seeking a balanced approach that acknowledges the complexities of interpretation while staying attuned to the socio-political contexts influencing both the text and its author.

Furthermore, feminist literary criticism, drawing from wider literary theory movements, frequently questions the conventional notion of the 'Death of the Author'. Coined by Roland Barthes, this concept proposes that the interpretation of a text should not be solely guided by the author's intentions and identity. Rather, emphasis should be placed on the reader's interpretation and the inherent meaning embedded within the text. Within the realm of feminist literary criticism, this concept is navigated with a nuanced outlook. Feminists acknowledge the value of analyzing a text independently of the author, yet they also appreciate the relevance of authorial intent, especially when scrutinizing gender-related themes and representations.

Feminist critics may delve into the author's intentions to reveal implicit biases, question stereotypes, or bring attention to subversive messages concerning gender roles. Nevertheless, their approach does not hinge solely on the author's intent, as they acknowledge the broader impact of cultural, historical, and societal influences in shaping a literary work.

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8- Conclusion:

Feminist literary criticism consistently navigates a nuanced path that strikes a balance between recognizing the autonomy of a text and considering the author's intentions, especially when delving into themes related to gender, power dynamics, and the depiction of women in literature. This methodological approach endeavors to appreciate the multifaceted nature of interpretation, acknowledging that a literary work can carry layers of meaning beyond the author's explicit intentions. By acknowledging the independence of the text, feminist critics emphasize that a work can take on a life of its own, shaped by the diverse perspectives of readers and the evolving cultural landscape. Simultaneously, the consideration of the author's intent is not dismissed; instead, it is woven into the analytical fabric to unveil the potential biases, cultural influences, and societal contexts that may have shaped the work. This dynamic approach seeks a harmonious equilibrium, recognizing that understanding a literary piece requires a holistic perspective that encompasses both the inherent qualities of the text and the broader socio-political conditions that have contributed to its creation. In essence, feminist literary criticism aspires to navigate this intricate interplay to offer a comprehensive and insightful interpretation of literature.

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