

Feminist Literary Criticism: The Case Study of Paul Elam's Short Story "Anger Management"

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Abstract

Paul Elam is an initiator of "A Voice for Men", a site dedicated to masculinism and men's rights. Elam and his group insist that men are oppressed and deprived in all over the world generally and in American society especially. He also organised a conference about the issues faced by men and from that platform, he criticised feminist ideology. Elam also writes articles and short stories about his perspective and expresses his counter-feminist ideas freely. "Anger Management" is his popular short story among readers which is pointed many times by some feminists. This short story tells about a man who broke the nose of his wife with his punch because she ran away with his business partner. As a result, a man was sent to a jail. The short story was analysed critically with feminist perspective and checked how a woman was characterised within it. Some major themes of feminism such as male-dominance, gender inferiority, powerlessness of women, female physical & mental qualities, sexuality, suffrage and stereotypes about women were studied in it. It was concluded that the writer has tried to sympathise with that man, a protagonist who exercised a violence against his wife. In this way, a domestic violence is supported by him. In addition, a woman is presented as powerless, sexual slave and stereotyped as disloyal to her husband who can run away from his home any time she wants.

Keywords:

Elam, Feminism, Literary Criticism, Violence, Misogyny

Introduction

Paul Elam is the founder and animating force of "A Voice for Men" which is an influential site for men's rights movement. A Voice for Men is one of the most visible and active among many men's rights activism (MRA) sites, video channels and forums for people who are involved in the movement. It also includes some women. The group claims that men are oppressed in American society and intends to diminish feminism. Some have criticized men's rights activism because of packaging misogyny as preaching equal rights for men (Kate, 2014). Elam believes men are society's victims and need a forum to vent. He added institutions like marriage and unfair family courts have become risky for men (Pry & Valiente, 2013).

Elam's anti-feminist attitude is so clear from his writings that sometimes he calls a woman a monster for trying to care for her little boy (Munchausen, 2014) and he is also a fierce misogynist with a penchant for angry, violent rhetoric that is full of only-slightly veiled threats (Futrelle, 2014a, para. 2). There is Elam's 2010 post where he claims that women get raped because they are stupid, arrogant, and narcissistic (DiBranco, 2014). According to Elam (2010), it is a testament to men, and an exposure of lies perpetrated against them by gender ideologues that scholars have understood

this last half century without war in the streets. It has always been in fortune of men to sacrifice for others better than themselves, and they have justified that with their silence in the face of so many regular abuses. Betting on that silence to continue when men are hungry is stupidity.

Paul Elam organized an international conference on men's issues and as a result, many feminists criticised the debates taken place there just like in past men's rights activists have long been notorious in feminist circles (Stevens, 2014). One speaker of the conference supposed that women are solely accountable for all domestic violence because, having all the power in relationships, they could normally choose not to wed violent men (Hesse, 2014). These types of slogans arised another debate among feminists and others critics. The followers of Elam say that they are oppressed by irrational feminists who do not like men. The group also blames on women of exaggerating the number of rape and denounces "the institution of marriage as unsafe and unsuitable for modern men" (Neavling, 2014).

Paul Elam also writes articles and short-stories about men's rights and anti-feminism. "Anger Management" is his controversial short-story that, according to some critics, reflects his counter-feminist viewpoint. In Elam's words, "it is based on a true story" (2012). The story is written after the twenty-year experience of Elam, he worked as a drug and alcohol counselor. For his counselees, the domestic violence was a recurring issue. He further tells that "sometimes the stories were not as predictable or stereotypical as what people hear about" (p. 20).

The short story "Anger management" is criticised litterally with feminist perspective. Feminist literary criticism is a movement of human philosophy with some ideals that emphasizes the true and lawful status of women in literature. Literary critics of feminism are more concerned with language and script about gender as compared to sociopolitical feminists. Ellen Morgan restated Woolf's advice: "Feminist criticism should, I believe encourage an art true to women's experience and not filtered through a male perspective or constricted to fit male standards" (Register, 1989, p. 19).

Research Question

How is a woman presented in Elam's short-story regarding feminist perspective?

Research Method

The content analysis of the Elam's short-story was conducted and the following themes of concerns were explored in its text applying the measures of feminist literary theory.

1. Petrirtic society or male-dominated society where women are dependent.
2. Woemen are inferior than men.
3. Women are powerless.
4. Women have low physical or mental qualities.
5. Women are sexual salves.
6. Women have no rights to suffrage.
7. Negative stereotypes about women.

Theoretical Framework

The present research is based on feminist literary theory. This theory explains a literary phenomenon with respect to a feminist perspective. Feminist literary theory is a wide umbrella under which many critics survive with some different understandings of literature about women. Among feminist theorists, an essence of woman is a common theme. Feminist literary criticism arised a theoretical issue with the birth of the new women's movement commenced in the early 1960s (Oppermann, 1994). By analyzing the roles of the women within the literature, it can be revealed that what kind of personal qualities the author ascribes to the women and what kind of role the women and men would have played in relation to each other, which adds an upper level of comprehension to any text (Wilcox, 2009).

Feminist critics want to change the great canon of Western literature because, they think, it was unilaterly men who composed those works and male critics who decided for their importance (Gardiner, p. 395). There are two different modes of feminist criticism. The first mode is studies the feminist as reader, and it presents feminist readings of texts which conceptualizes the images, and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and women-as-sign in semiotic systems. The second mode of feminist criticism dessiminated by this approach is the study of women as writers and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women...(Showlter, 1981, pp. 182-184).

The three main types of feminism are: a) Liberal feminism that asserts that women do not have the same freedom and

opportunities in society as men. b) Social feminism calims that women are oppressed due to the class system. c) Redical feminism focuses on sexual relationship between man and women and defined that men are the problem and women are the solution (Rachman, para.12-14). French, American and British literary theorists share some basic ideas of feminism. Showalter, a major representative of Anglo-American feminist literary theory, emphasizes two types of feminist criticism: the first one is the feminist critique, that offers feminist readings of male texts in which stereotypes of women in literature are inquired. In her opoint of view, this approach is restricted because it relies on male critical theory to be global. Therefore she adopts the secondary mode of feminist criticism, gynocriticism, that will build a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and develop new models based on the study of female experience (Kostic, 2006, p. 72). Kristeva, a great symbol of French feminist literary theory, goes beyond gender differences; she is not female or male focused; according to her, feminist writing has nothing to do with the sex of the author, it is a character inscribed in the text itself that rises at points when the author is generally not in control of the meaning of the text (Ibid, 2006, p. 73).

While the problems of difference and diversity were significant both to the political policy of searching about the interactions of race, class and gender and to the deconstructive policy of postmodern feminist theory, they also evoked some doubt among feminist scholars about the viability of the feminist enterprise in general (Davis, 2008, p. 71). As one might fortell, every feminism has the recognition of the material conditions,

ideological presuppositions and socio-political structures of its place of birth. In the 21st century, feminist theorising in some countries of the globe has intertwined with study of sexuality, queer theories and trans activism. In other countries of the world, issues such as access to education, sanitation, and health care, prohibition of child marriage, divorce reform, and equitable land and inheritance rights remain the focus (Macleod, Marecek & Capdevila, 2014, p. 7).

Discussion

In this short-story, Howard Franks is a main character who narrates his incident which led him to a jail. He tells about his domestic violence against his wife to a group set in a court. One of his audiences is a psychotherapist. Howard was a blameless person leading his life with peace and happiness until six weeks earlier. He married a woman and two daughters were born with them. He was a successful businessman working with another partner. One day, his father, living far from them, died unexpectedly and Howard's wife convinced him to go alone to attend his father's funeral in Baltimore, a city. On the return, when he was coming back, he thought to buy some flowers in the way for his wife, Kate, as a present. When he checked his credit card and discussed the matter of no balance in it, with bank, he was informed that all his money is snatched by his wife. When he reached his home, he found his home empty from every thing because his wife had taken all the precious things with her and went away with his business partner. The two kids were also stashed by her.

Howard headed towards the house of his business partner where his wife was living with him. Howard's wife opened the door wearing a silk robe he gave her

at last Christmas. When he asked her about the reason of leaving his home permanently, her reply was very insulting. She told him that he was a loser because he could not fulfill her needs from the day of the marriage. She further said that it is better for him to be far from his two daughters and any more contact with her or them would be through a lawyer. She also told him to kiss her for a last time as farewell. Consequently, Howard punched her face and broke her nose. After that, he was sent to a jail.

After doing try for weeks to converse with his daughters, last week Howard was permitted to talk to his oldest, Lisa, on the telephone. It was a great pleasure for him to talk with Lisa on telephone. At once, he told her daughter that he missed her very much and could not wait to see her. As soon as he vowed about meeting with Lisa, she replied, "I can't see you till your better, Daddy. Mommy said you're sick."

As a feminist literary critic, the researcher picked some selected passages of Elam's short-story and analyzed them critically. There were many counter-feminist ideas found in it. For example, "I gave my wife so many beatings I couldn't even begin to count them. In here I learned where it was coming from. Power, man, and I am just flat addicted to it. It gave me a rush, a sick rush, to do what I did to her" (Elam, p. 20). In this type of confession, the short-story writer tried to convince the readers about power and strength of men. It indicates a male-dominated society where Howard and his wife Kate were living. Howard justified his violence against his wife because he was powerful. "But my credit card was declined. I called the bank and was informed that all my accounts were closed. All the money was gone". "I went home and nobody was there. I found the

kids with her mother. And she, she was..." "She was with my business partner. They had taken it all. The money, the business, all gone. Everything" (Elam, p. 21). In these sentences, the writer stereotyped a woman negatively as disloyal with her husband. She was so disloyal that she cleaned up every thing found in his home and ran away with his business partner.

"She told me it was because I was a loser. She told me she was a woman with needs and that I never, from the day we were married, met them"... "She told me that she would kiss me goodbye but she didn't think I'd like the taste of another man's cock on her lips" (Elam, p. 21). In these dictions, a woman is presented as a sex slave who could not live without fulfillment of her sexual desires. In another place, Elam clarified, "I have ideas about women who spend evenings in bars hustling men for drinks, playing on their sexual desires ..." (Futrelle, 2014a). "I punched her in the face and broke her nose. I just stood there afterward, looking at her on the ground with her face full of blood. It was like I was watching a movie with the sound off" (Elam, p. 21). This passage shows the domestic violence exercised against women. "Are you saying she deserved to be battered, Howard? That she deserved a broken nose?" "No, Ms. Pitts. I am saying she deserved the ass kicking of a lifetime." "One of the men muttered "Fucking A right,"" (Elam, p. 22). Again, the writer justified a domestic violence against women and exaggerated that they are deserved the ass kicking of a lifetime. The readers are expected to mutter "fucking A, right," along with the anonymous man in his listeners after Howard tells that his wife deserved more than a broken nose (Futrelle, 2014b).

"I [Howard] was thinking the whole time that as bad as things were that I could live with it, that I could manage a way to move forward if I could just be with my children" (Elam, p. 22). In these lines, the writer tried to tell his readers that Howard, as a man, had a great sense to rearrange his life and live again with Kate and her children but it was his wife who was solely responsible for all distractions taken place in their family. A negative role is ascribed to a female. Actullay, Elam wants to explain that a man is a real victum of dometic violence. Each year, October is celebrated as a domestic violence awareness month. According to Elam, "in the name of equality and fairness, I am proclaiming October to be Bash a Violent Bitch Month" (Futrelle, 2014a). In short, it may be inferred from the story that on many occasions, the violence against women is justified, and in fact, the men are victims who are sentenced for their violence by spending some time in jail, by having to go to psychological treatment, and by restrictions on contact with their children (Futrelle, 2014b).

Conclusion

In present short-story, Howard Franks, a man is a protagonist and his wife, Kate, a woman is an antogonist. In this way, Elam Pual epitomized misogyny at it's worst and masculism is emphasized unnecessarily. The tone of this short-story is anti-feminist because a woman is presented as powerless and sexual slave living in a male dominated society. A man is considered as a center of strenght, superior than woman and having a natural right to exercise domestic violence against woman. A woman is also stereotyped as disloyal with her husband. The writer has so sympathy for Howard, that throughout the story, he is supposed as victim and innocent person. Some

external statements of the writer also support his views about women presented in this short-story. Finally, it can be concluded that the author has anti-feminist attitude that was clear from his fiction.

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