
Susan Gubar. *Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 237p.

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For many underrepresented groups including blacks, women, and homosexuals, the twentieth century was a time of rapid political change in the United States. As their movements toward equal representation grew in numbers, so did their representation in the realms of literature and academia. The issue of “fairness” or academic moralism took on a new shape as these groups began to dismantle the assumption of oneness within the academic community. In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, an ambitious book which helped to map the landscape of feminist criticism for a generation of scholars. Together, they have published numerous works since then, along with numerous works published since then, including *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. In her new book, *Critical Condition*, Gubar assesses the changes in feminist thought during the past two decades.

In some ways, Gubar’s new collection hits the mark. She deftly works through issues of feminist theory within the academy, addressing issues of race, sexual preference, and religion as they define and shape the nature of scholarly practice. Her assessment of the current condition of feminist studies is astute: her “sense of being poised between causes for regret and for celebration” is well-defined as she discusses the work of artists, writers, and academic professionals. She repeatedly stresses that the condition of feminist studies “has itself become critical because of a number of heated disputes that have put its proponents at odds.”

This becomes problematic within the larger context of the book for a number of reasons. For one, although the book’s title suggests it is about “feminism” *per se*, it is almost exclusively focused on academic feminism. Readers looking for a wider perspective will find little to engage their interests in this book. While this isn’t necessarily a problem, it becomes one because Gubar herself sees current feminist theory as largely irrelevant to everyday life. She points out that in our specialized worlds, we often speak only to ourselves in “calcified” prose; thus, our message isn’t ever heard beyond the walls of our cloister. However, Gubar uses her own share of calcified prose throughout this book as she makes her observations. Because she describes her book as an attempt to suggest points of re-unification, the very language in which her message is delivered seems contrary to that goal.

Gubar also missteps slightly in her essay, “Women Artists and Contemporary Racechanges.” This essay attempts to analyze some very complex works by Black women artists whose primary focus is on the multi-layered issues surrounding race and gender. Her readings of these works are most convincing; however, she seems to ignore important aspects of these works as they are situated in their own unique Black feminist context. For example, in her analysis of Faith Ringgold’s “We Came to America” quilt, she points out that the quilt works as a kind of “shorthand on the detriments of twentieth-century racial paradigms.” What she does not acknowledge in this work, what she in fact seems quite oblivious to, is the fact that this is a quilt. She repeatedly refers to it as a painting. Removing this work from its appropriate context as a quilt negates its significance as a work of art cast in a medium historically created and dominated by women. By focusing solely on its racial implications, she diminishes this work’s other role as a female representation of the American experience. While she is distressed by the divisiveness she finds amongst those who would call themselves feminists, she never really addresses the lack of understanding that has caused these fractures. Nonetheless, the rest of this essay is quite good, and it represents the finest piece of writing in the collection.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of this book can be summed up in the absolute weakness of the essay “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” — an essay that previously appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 1998. As Gubar traces the last thirty years of feminist criticism, she suggests that the field suffers from “a bad case of critical anorexia” forced by “racialized identity politics” that make “women” mean “only a very particularized kind of woman” and of the poststructuralist notion that “women” is a fiction. In a rather vicious one-sided series of attacks against Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Hazel Carby, bell hooks, and Chandra Mohanty aimed primarily at dismantling their ideas and personal writing styles, Gubar mourns the “barrage of diatribes directed at white feminists” and claims that in recent years, “white feminists began to feel beleaguered by blatantly imperative efforts to right the wrong of black female instrumentality.” This seems fundamentally unfair and absurdly paradoxical. The ultimate effect of this essay’s inclusion in this collection is to make the strongest essay, “Women Artists and Contemporary Racechanges,” appear to be the antithesis of what is intended: all of this essay’s subtle nuance and intelligent critique, when held up against “What Ails Feminist Criticism,” sounds like a hideous “token” effort at inclusion. This seems to subvert the very crux of her position, particularly after reading the rather insipid essay, “The Graying of Professor Erma Bombeck.”

On a positive note, Gubar's profound concern for the future of feminist thought is deeply embedded within every essay in this book. She knows that the survival of "the hive" depends on successors. As she discusses the responses to a survey she sent to forty feminist critics — on their hopes for the future of feminist criticism and their views of its major accomplishments — she is both hopeful and careful all at once, charging them to remember how much has been achieved, but how much there is left to do. There should be little worry about successors. There are many willing to take up the torch, so to speak, although they will not always do so comfortably. Out of their own joyful and bitter experiences, women will continue to analyze the ways in which systems of racial, sexual, and class hierarchy are linked. Still, analysis is not enough. The great critical work of feminism —philosophical, scholarly, and activist — is to claim women's intellectual and bodily integrity for both the national and the international human-rights agenda. This important endeavor will surely consume another century's worth of energy.