Reimagining Postcritique and Literary Reading: An Interview with Rita Felski

Shi Xue & Rita Felski

Abstract: Rita Felski, John Stewart Bryan Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and former editor of *New Literary History*. She is one of the leading figures in contemporary literary theory. Her work has touched upon various fields, including theories of interpretation, literary sociology, modernity studies, and feminist criticism. She has played a pivotal role in ongoing debates about postcritique. This article features a scholarly interview with Felski by Shi Xue during her visit to the Royal Holloway University of London. This interview is presented according to the internal logic of Felski's intellectual development and the theoretical positioning of postcritique, focusing on three interrelated themes: her transformation from feminist criticism to a postcritical stance and her underlying concerns; the foundational role of literary reading and audiences within her broader framework; and the theoretical limits and methodological tensions of postcritique. In the interview, Felski looks back on her academic path and emphasizes that her intellectual trajectory does not represent a paradigmatic rupture but rather a continuous process of engagement with the sociality of literature, reading experience, and affective structures through a critical reassessment of the tradition of critique. She also responds to questions and doubts raised by other scholars, clarifying that postcritique is neither an anti-theoretical gesture nor a closed methodological system. Instead, it's better understood as an open critical stance. The conversation further discusses the cross-cultural dissemination of postcritique and the institutional conditions of knowledge production, with a focus on its translation and reinterpretation in Chinese academia. For Felski, the significance of postcritique lies in its effort to reestablish a connection between everyday life and the public aspect of literary studies.

Keywords: Rita Felski; postcritique; literary reading; everyday life; critical orientation

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标题：重思后批判与文学阅读：芮塔·菲尔斯基访谈录

内容摘要：芮塔·菲尔斯基是弗吉尼亚大学英语系教授，曾任《新文学史》主编，是当代文学理论领域最具影响力的学者之一。其学术实践横跨文学阐释理论、现代性研究、文学社会学以及女性主义批评，是“后批判”讨论中的核心引领者。本文为拾雪在伦敦大学访学期间对菲尔斯基的专题访谈。围绕其思想演进的内在逻辑及“后批判”的理论定位问题，本篇访谈聚焦三个层面：其从女性主义批评到后批判立场的转向及其问题意识的延续性；文学阅读与受众问题在其理论结构中的基础地位；以及“后批判”在方法论争议与学术制度语境中的理论边界与实践张力。访谈中，菲尔斯基回顾自身学术形成过程，指出其理论发展并非范式断裂式的转向，而是在反思批判传统的过程中，持续强化对文学社会性、阅读经验与情感结构的关注。围绕学界对“后批判”提出的诸多质疑，她作出系统回应并强调，“后批判”既非反理论姿态，也非封闭的方法体系，而更宜被理解为一种开放且具有生成性的批评取向。此外，访谈进一步讨论“后批判”在学术制度与知识生产机制中的现实处境及其跨文化传播问题，尤其关注其在中国学界的译介与再阐释路径。她认为，“后批判”的意义在于重构文学研究的公共维度，重建学术阅读与现实生活世界之间的关联。

关键词：芮塔·菲尔斯基；后批判；文学阅读；日常生活；批评取向

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Intellectual Trajectories and the Centrality of Everyday Life

Shi Xue (Shi for short hereafter): Your early work was deeply shaped by feminist criticism and engagements with high theory, while later your writings emphasize the uses of literature, particularly its social dimensions, as seen in the influential books you have published—*Uses of Literature* (2008), *The Limits of Critique* (2015), and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020). You once described your intellectual development as “*a weird trajectory*” (Williams 122). How do you understand this shift in emphasis? What were the key experiences or reflections that

contributed to this change in orientation?

Rita Felski (Felski for short hereafter): First of all, I would not say that there has been a dramatic rupture in my work, but rather a shift in emphasis. I do not repudiate anything I've written. My earlier books in feminist criticism, when I reread my first or second book, I still find myself largely in agreement with their arguments. There has not been a major intellectual volte-face. What has remained consistent throughout is my commitment to examining how theory relates to everyday life. I have never considered myself an advocate of "high theory" in the conventional sense. I always wanted to think about how theoretical debates relate to the everyday lives or the books that ordinary people read.

My first book, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), was a critique of feminist literary theory on several grounds. On the one hand, certain strands of feminist criticism emphasized a notion of female identity, but I was skeptical of the idea that women share a unified or homogeneous set of experiences. On the other hand, poststructuralist critiques by figures such as Derrida deconstructed identity altogether, yet I had little sympathy for this tendency as well, because it often resulted in abstract, esoteric academic debates that bore little relation to women's lived experiences. My aim in that book was to develop a more sociologically oriented way of thinking about women's writing, suggesting that its significance lay in the social changes it could bring about, rather than its presumed expression of some pre-given female identity. Even then, I focused on popular feminist fiction rather than solely on canonical texts and asked why such fiction matters and what it does for its readers.

My second book, *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), was also not an exercise in high theory. It includes a chapter on women and shopping—"Imagined Pleasures: The Erotics and Aesthetics of Consumption" [1]—and another on Marie Corelli[2], often described as the queen of bestsellers. Again, my intention was to connect theoretical arguments to the everyday lives of people outside the academy, and that has remained a consistent thread in my work. The main difference is that my first four books were focused on feminism, whereas I later moved in a broader direction and began to comment on literature more generally. Eventually, I became more explicit about my reservations concerning critique. But this should be understood as a shift in emphasis rather than a rejection or a radical break.

1 See Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, 61-90.

2 Marie Corelli (1855-1924) was the most famous and highly paid novelist of the late 19th century. Her novel *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) sold more copies on first publication than any previous English novel and became one of the best-selling works of its time. Felski discusses Corelli extensively in *The Gender of Modernity* as an example of popular fiction and its relation to femininity and modern culture.

Shi: Given that your intellectual formation was deeply shaped by feminist criticism, to what extent do you think your feminist background provided you with distinctive conceptual perspectives or methodological sensibilities that continue to inform your subsequent critical trajectory?

Felski: As I mentioned earlier, my interest in feminism has always involved, on the one hand, a critique of sexism, hierarchy, and gendered forms of exclusion, and on the other hand, an attention to the ways in which women have often been associated with everyday life—an association that has long interested me. Where I diverged from certain strands of feminist theory was in the assumption—especially prevalent at one point—that "woman" designates a coherent set of characteristics or dispositions. According to these accounts, women were presumed to share particular personality traits: for instance, an emphasis on relationships, weaker ego boundaries, or a tendency toward submissiveness. These descriptions failed to reflect the diversity of women's experiences, including my own. While I remained committed to feminist critiques of sexism, I rejected essentialist definitions of female identity, even when they came from within feminist discourse.

At the same time, I was—and remain—sympathetic to feminist emphases on everyday life. In my essay "The Invention of Everyday Life" (2017)[1], I examine how the category of the everyday has been consistently associated with women and often devalued within modern theory. Everyday life becomes linked to the domestic sphere—cooking, shopping, domestic labor—activities that critical theory frequently dismisses. It is associated with repetition and routine, qualities often framed as undesirable or intellectually uninteresting. My aim in that essay was to defend these qualities and to argue that repetition, habit, and domesticity have their own forms of value and are indispensable dimensions of human life. In this sense, my engagement with feminism has been grounded in a feminist appreciation of the everyday. That emphasis, I would say, is the most enduring influence I carried from feminism into my later work.

Shi: Theoretical inquiry, in my view, offers ways of thinking about society rather than a mere operational methodology, as in the works of Edward Said or Gayatri Spivak. You have noted that *Literature After Feminism* (2003) was partly motivated by your frustration with the media's distortions and vilification of feminism.[2] Could *The Limits* similarly be understood as arising from a sense of

1 See Rita Felski, "The Invention of Everyday Life," *New Formations* 39 (1999): 13-31.

2 See Jeffrey J. Williams, "Articulating Feminism: An Interview with Rita Felski," *Minnesota Review* 63/64 (2005): 113.

dissatisfaction—specifically, a frustration with the disciplinary inertia of critique[1] and the broader sense of crisis within the humanities?

Felski: I would say that the inertia of critique is indeed part of what I was responding to, but the turning point came somewhat earlier, before I wrote *Uses of Literature*. It actually began during a conversation with an editor at Blackwell. She asked me what I thought about the state of literary studies, and I found myself complaining about how bored I had become with certain routinized forms of critique. She suggested that I turn those frustrations into a book, and that eventually became *Uses of Literature*. After that point, I began to articulate more directly about the limitations of critique as a dominant method in literary studies. One issue, however, is that I do not believe that a shift to "post" criticism or postcritique could transform the humanities. Such a change would not be realistic. The decline of the humanities is driven by political, economic, and institutional forces that methodological shifts alone cannot address. Nevertheless, I do think postcritique has the potential to be productive in certain ways. I see real value in postcritique. It opens up more space for readers outside the academy. After *The Limits* was published, I received emails from people who told me that they had been hesitant to pursue doctoral studies in literature because they felt disheartened by the dominance of suspicion and critique. Reading the book gave them hope again and renewed their sense of possibility. At an individual level, postcritique can make a difference, even if it cannot singlehandedly transform institutions—a hope that would be unrealistic.

Reading beyond the Academy: Readers, Publics, and the Social Meaning of Literature

Shi: Your reflections on everyday life also lead naturally to questions about readers outside the academy and about the broader publics addressed by literary criticism. When you were writing *The Limits*, did you anticipate that it would provoke such wide-ranging discussions, or even become entangled with political debates? How do you perceive these debates now? During your lecture at Queen Mary University of London, the moderator Matthew Rubery remarked humorously that everyone knows Felski is controversial—but not too controversial.[2] The term "controversial" has almost become a playful label attached to both you and

1 Here "critique" primarily refers to the dominant mode of suspicious interpretation in contemporary Anglo-American literary studies, often associated with the hermeneutics of suspicion. It does not encompass the full range of critical traditions such as the Frankfurt School or ecocriticism, which involve different theoretical agendas.

2 The remark was made by Matthew Rubery during Rita Felski's public lecture, "Expert Readers/Amateur Readers," delivered at Queen Mary University of London on 1 October 2024.

postcritique itself. How do you respond to this characterization?

Felski: No, I did not anticipate that the book would provoke such extensive discussion. My earlier books certainly did not attract that level of attention, and even *Uses of Literature*, which was published by Blackwell in the U.K., received relatively little promotion and relatively modest responses. So, I had no particular expectation that *The Limits* would be widely taken up and considered especially controversial. What I was saying felt almost like common sense—that was precisely why I wrote it.

What has been difficult, however, is that some of the responses have been quite upsetting. Thoughtful and substantive critiques are one thing; I welcome disagreements from readers who understand what I am arguing and then take issue with it. Such debates are productive and necessary. But I have also encountered a number of caricatures of my work—often in the form of brief dismissals suggesting that I hate theory or am opposed to critique. These responses give the impression that the writers have not actually read what I have written. Some critics, including Bruce Robbins, have gone so far as to claim that following my arguments would somehow lead us to stop caring about, for example, "drowned children" (375).[1] Such claims are, frankly, extraordinary distortions. In the United States especially, I have sometimes been portrayed as an advocate of aestheticism or even a neo–New Critical position, which is incorrect. My background is in British cultural studies, and I have never been interested in "art for art's sake." I argue that literary experience itself deserves serious attention, since this is why people read. Serious critique is one thing; blatant misrepresentation is another. The latter has been, from my point of view, quite troubling.

Shi: Since *Uses of Literature*, your writing has become more accessible, and you have expressed a desire to reach a broader readership. How have questions of readership—both academic and non-academic—shaped your work, and do you see this concern becoming more central in your future projects? You also draw on pragmatist thought, particularly Richard Rorty. To what extent has pragmatism influenced your interest in expanding the audience for literary criticism?

Felski: As I mentioned earlier, when discussing my first book—which grew directly out of my doctoral dissertation—and also *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* and

1 Bruce Robbins offers one of the most forceful critiques of Felski's postcritical arguments. In his PMLA review of *The Limits of Critique*, he contends—mischaracterizing her position—that taking Felski's arguments seriously would lead critics to ignore questions of injustice, even suggesting that her framework would require us "to talk about flowers rather than drowned Syrian children." See Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 2 (2017): 375.

The Gender of Modernity, I was certainly interested in popular readers in terms of content. For instance, I wrote about Marie Corelli as well as popular feminist fiction. But in terms of my own writing style, those early books were unquestionably very academic and, frankly, quite unreadable. At the time, I did not think about questions of readability. I completed my PhD in a German department, where the emphasis was on argumentative rigor rather than style. I still remember that one of the readers for my Harvard University Press manuscript was Elaine Showalter. She liked the book but commented that it was written in an extremely dull manner—and at that point it struck me that I had truly never considered questions of readability. It had genuinely never occurred to me that style was something to consider. However, I realized it was rather absurd to write in such a dry academic voice. I still aim to make substantive intellectual arguments. Admittedly, my books remain too academic for a general audience, but I now try to write in a way that is at least accessible to advanced undergraduates, not only doctoral students and professors. I seek a balance between intellectual seriousness and readability. As for pragmatism and Richard Rorty, yes, I mention him often. He was a colleague of mine at the University of Virginia. One thing I admired about Rorty was that, although he was an extraordinarily intelligent philosopher, he managed to write in a remarkably clear and engaging way. In that sense, he has certainly been something of a model for me.

Shi: You have spoken about your lower-middle-class background, and you have noted that your years teaching in Australia shaped your perspective on academic culture and readers outside the academy.[1] To what extent has this position influenced the way you think about critique, especially its relation to classroom teaching, scholarly communities, and wider publics beyond the university?

Felski: The largest influence on my sense of self has been my social class, and that is not surprising in an English context where class remains a pervasive category of thought. When I went to Cambridge as an undergraduate, the university was—then as now—dominated by students from elite schools and affluent backgrounds. I grew up in a very different social environment. I did not know the right wine to drink; to be honest, I still don't know. I am not complaining—I feel grateful to have entered that world—but I was acutely aware that my background differed from that of many of my peers. At times, I still feel a certain anger or frustration when I hear academics speak about non-academics—especially the lower-middle class—in condescending ways. Terms such as "petit bourgeois," for instance, are sometimes

1 See Anneloek Scholten et al, "The English Studies Interview: Rita Felski," *English Studies* 6 (2024): 972-973.

used almost as dismissive labels. More broadly, there is often a tendency within academic culture to describe people without much higher education in reductive or disparaging terms. When I encounter such attitudes, I find it difficult to listen dispassionately. My family came from a social world where supporting right-leaning or populist political figures was common. Their political outlook grew out of their environment rather than any supposed intellectual deficiency. This has made me attentive to how political choices emerge from social and educational circumstances. Those views were shaped by people's daily life, their economic conditions, and their community affiliations. They are not, as is sometimes implied, the product of ignorance or stupidity. This kind of class blindness is, in my view, one of the more persistent blind spots within academic discourse.

As you are no doubt aware, in much of the West, there is now increasing political polarization organized around education. Parties that once appealed primarily to working-class voters—such as the Labour Party in the UK or the Democratic Party in the United States—now draw much of their support from the highly educated. Blue-collar working-class voters, by contrast, often feel like intellectuals look down upon them, and are turning to right-wing or populist parties. Many parties that once identified as center-left now draw much of their support from people with college degrees. Meanwhile, voters who feel excluded by the cultural authority of intellectuals often look for other political options. This divide continues to grow. The highly educated and the working class often struggle to understand each other. This polarization shapes not only the contemporary political landscape but also how we imagine, address, and understand different kinds of readers, inside and outside the academy. It is an issue I think about a great deal.

Shi: You have argued that your aim is "to deconstruct—not abolish—oppositions between literary critics and everyday readers" (Scholten et al. 973). How can we understand the relationship between these two modes of reading once we move beyond this simple opposition? What possibilities does this recontextualization present for thinking about the broader social role of literary studies today?

Felski: What I am trying to argue is that we need to acknowledge the differences between academic readers and everyday readers, while also recognizing their similarities. They are neither opposites nor identical, and paying attention to their distinctions and overlaps offers a more accurate picture of how reading works. I also think this position is more democratic in a certain sense, insofar as it avoids placing academic critics in a position of implicit superiority over ordinary

readers. I do not imagine that such an argument will fundamentally transform the field; intellectual interventions typically have limited effects. But I hope it might at least diminish a tendency I often notice—an unreflective condescension toward non-academic readers. As Karolina Watroba has observed, academic scholarship is largely read by other academic readers, who are "a small fraction of all readers—an exception, not the rule" (2). Literature is not written exclusively for academic readers, yet academic criticism often proceeds as if it were. Nevertheless, scholars frequently advance claims about the political meanings of texts without considering who their actual readers are. This strikes me as puzzling: if we do not know—or do not care to know—who our fellow readers are, then to whom are our interpretations addressed? This question becomes increasingly crucial when we reflect on the broader social significance of literary studies.

Reconfiguring Criticism: Postcritique, Method, and the Question of Approach

Shi: Postcritique is often described as responding both to theoretical developments and to the institutional condition of literary studies. How would you characterize its conceptual orientation: as a theory, a method, an approach, or a critical stance? In *The Limits*, you resisted defining postcritique as a prescriptive method, yet later you suggested it is "best understood as an approach rather than a method" (Scholten et al. 977). How should we understand these formulations? Do they indicate a shift in your thinking, or simply a clarification of its scope?

Felski: These questions are closely connected. Postcritique certainly relies on theory; it depends on making theoretical arguments. However, it is not a theoretical system in the sense of a self-enclosed framework governed by a canonical text. There is no equivalent of a Marx or a Freud whose writings lay out their parameters in advance. Postcritique is far more ad hoc and flexible in its orientation. At one point, I described postcritique as more a method than a theory, largely because *theory*, for me, often evokes the sense of a comprehensive world picture—such as a Marxist or a Freudian worldview. *Method*, by contrast, initially seemed to capture something more practical: a way of working with texts or a way of developing arguments. But even this term has limitations. As Toril Moi once pointed out to me in our discussion of this topic, the word *method* is, for her, too closely associated with the scientific method and its connotations of fixed procedures and rule-bound steps. Postcritique is certainly not a method in that sense. This is why the *approach* may well be the most appropriate term.

I am frequently asked what it means to conduct a postcritical reading, and whether it can be spelled out in a set of steps. But that is precisely what postcritique

resists. It cannot be codified; it depends on who the reader is, what questions they bring, and what they want to understand. Unlike some forms of criticism—feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic—it does not begin with a predetermined lens or object of suspicion. It's not a matter of saying, "I'm a feminist, so I will look for gender hierarchies," or "I'm a Marxist, so I will look for class relations." Postcritique can include many different kinds of approaches. Still, certain commitments do characterize postcritical work. One treats the text and fellow readers as equals rather than assuming a position of superiority. One attends not only to the experience of reading but also to the activity of interpretation, and one avoids reducing a text to a mere symptom of some larger social or ideological system. These negative commitments define clearly what postcritique is not, while leaving considerable room for what it can be. I should add that I use the term somewhat hesitantly. Many scholars now grouped under "postcritique" do not use the term themselves, and their approaches differ significantly. This makes it difficult to generalize about postcritique as a whole. Even more than feminism or Marxism, it lacks a unifying set of assumptions. Perhaps the only shared premise is that critique has limits; what follows from that recognition can lead in many different directions.

Shi: Some scholars have described postcritique as a hybrid formation, drawing together heterogeneous resources from phenomenology, pragmatism, and new Actor–Network Theory, while also intersecting with debates in reception theory and new formalism.[1] Do you agree with this characterization? Would you consider this hybridity a strength of postcritique?

Felski: Yes, I think that is exactly right. In fact, my own work in many ways exemplifies this hybridity. What I offer is simply *my* version of postcritique; other scholars may have quite different versions. And one reason my trajectory looks

1 Representative works in these traditions—cited or discussed in Felski's writings—include the following. For reception theory, see Hans-Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, translated by Michael Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; Tony Bennett, "Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and Their Texts," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 1 (1985): 63-81, as an example of cultural-studies approaches to reception. For phenomenology, see Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971; Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1970. For pragmatism, see Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. For new formalism, see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. For Actor–Network Theory, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

somewhat distinct is that I have moved across several departments and engaged with a range of intellectual frameworks. I have never been committed to a single overarching framework. What I draw on depends very much on the questions I am asking. In *Hooked*, for instance, I turned to Actor-Network Theory; while in my forthcoming book, I engage contemporary German critical theory. Rather than beginning with a conceptual framework and applying it to texts, I start from the text and the problem, and then consider which theoretical resources might be most illuminating.

Different scholars have their own versions of postcritique. There is a helpful genealogy of the term that I can share with you. Even a brief look at the Wikipedia entry is revealing: it brings together Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading, Bruno Latour's reflections on critique, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's account of surface reading, and Toril Moi's Cavellian approach, among others. Yet most of these scholars do not identify themselves as postcritical, and their frameworks diverge significantly. This diversity also generates misunderstandings. Because Best and Marcus are often grouped with me, I am sometimes described as practicing surface reading, even though I have never used that term and explicitly note in *The Limits* that it does not capture what I am doing.[1] For anyone working on postcritique, it is therefore important either to differentiate clearly among these frameworks or to focus on one or two critics, rather than generalizing across a highly heterogeneous field. In short, postcritique has no unifying doctrine. The only thing we all have in common is that we think critique has limits. Beyond this negative premise, there is an open field of possible directions, if you like—something I see not as a weakness, but as one of the strengths of postcritical work.

Shi: As you have argued, critique continues to function as a form of cultural capital within academia. If postcritique is understood as an approach rather than a fixed method, what institutional trajectory might it follow? Once an interpretive orientation circulates within university curricula, journal publication, or research assessment, does it also face a certain risk of institutionalization or demands to demonstrate applicability? Can postcritique sustain its openness while negotiating the institutional structures that shape academic work?

Felski: I do not make any grand claims for postcritique. One of my long-standing concerns about critique—particularly in the existentialist sense of bad faith—is the disjunction between how critique represents itself and how it actually functions. Critique is frequently portrayed as radical, avant-garde, oppositional,

1 See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 54-56.

and even transformative. Yet in practice, it has become thoroughly embedded in the everyday business of academic life. In many North American universities—certainly in graduate programs—learning the skills of critique is effectively a requirement for entering the profession. If one wishes to complete a PhD or obtain an academic position, critique is often taken to be the default mode of scholarly competence. For this reason, it seems rather ludicrous, even untenable, to continue describing critique as inherently radical or oppositional.

In contrast, I make no such claims for postcritique. I see it as important not because it offers a revolutionary alternative, but because it opens up questions and possibilities that have been sidelined. It will inevitably become institutionalized, as all approaches do. Institutionalization itself is not the core issue; the problem, rather, is that critique pretending it's not institutionalized; it often presents itself as if it stood outside institutional structures, even though it is deeply embedded within them. Once postcritique circulates through universities, it will be subject to the bureaucratic mechanisms that shape all academic work. It may even become a way of securing tenure or professional advancement. It will also be simplified, reduced, and eventually displaced by yet another approach. This is entirely normal. Postcritique is not a timeless doctrine but a contingent intervention that questions what I take to be certain forms of intellectual dogma.

Shi: Postcritique developed within specific institutional and cultural frameworks. Its significance may vary across different cultural or national contexts. From where you stand, how does its relevance change as it travels across academic contexts like the US, Europe, or China? Do different intellectual traditions or institutional settings create new challenges for its openness?

Felski: Postcritique is not an absolute or universal doctrine—it grew out of certain historical and institutional moments. So, its impact really shifts depending on where you look. In *The Limits*, I was responding to a certain intellectual climate in American universities, especially within graduate education, and to a lesser extent in the UK. My argument was directed at that specific environment rather than at critique everywhere or for all time. This point becomes evident when postcritique travels. In some places, the concerns I raise resonate strongly; in others, they may be largely irrelevant. When I lectured in Poland, for example, I suggested that some of my arguments might not make much sense there. Literary teaching in Poland has long carried a strong national and cultural inflection—seeing literature as an embodiment of collective identity. In such a context, scholars have not spent much time questioning canonical texts. One could even say that *more* critique might be

useful. This is why I resist any notion that postcritique is a one-size-fits-all model. Whether critique requires reassessment—and in what form—always depends on each place's own intellectual history, educational system, and cultural politics. The international trajectory of postcritique will therefore be uneven, contingent, and deeply shaped by national and institutional specificities.

Shi: In China, people started talking more about postcritique after the Chinese versions of *Uses of Literature* (2019), *The Gender of Modernity* (2020), and *The Limits* (2023) came out, but the discussion is relatively small. Most of the scholars who do join in seem to circle back to the same questions: What exactly is the normative grounding behind postcritique, and does it really work when you try to apply it to actual texts? So, how do you answer that kind of pushback? And do these debates hint at bigger issues—like, is postcritique just running into the same roadblocks whenever it moves into a new cultural or academic setting?

Felski: It is not surprising that the reception of postcritique in China is still quite limited, with many scholars unsure of what the term means or how it might be used. When new ideas travel, they are often taken up selectively, misread, or treated primarily as tools to be slotted into preexisting frameworks; this happens everywhere. As for questions about whether postcritique has a clear normative foundation or can be applied in textual practice, much depends on what is meant by a "clear" normative foundation. If this implies a single overarching framework—whether philosophical, political, or theoretical—as an ultimate explanatory truth, then postcritique certainly does not claim that there exists one framework capable of explaining everything in the world. To my mind, this is not a weakness but an advantage, since no single framework can fully capture social or literary complexity.

However, it is mistaken to say that postcritique is uninterested in normative questions. On the contrary, it engages them directly—a point I discuss at length in my new book. I have long been concerned with norms, and in literary studies—particularly in the United States—there is often a pronounced suspicion toward them, especially within certain strands of queer theory. My training in German thought has led me to a different view: norms are inescapable. Any critique of norms inevitably presupposes normative assumptions of its own. The moment we describe something as good or bad, just or unjust, we invoke a normative vocabulary.

Postcritique, then, is hardly indifferent to normative foundations. Some misunderstandings may also arise simply because people have not read the work closely. *Uses of Literature* addresses normative concerns directly—especially in the chapter on recognition, which explores the deeply human desire to be

acknowledged, ethically and politically. This is a profoundly normative question. In *Hooked* and in subsequent work, I argue that we cannot be separated from our attachments. These attachments are not limited to feelings, love, empathy, or pleasure; they also involve moral commitments—what matters to us and what we value in our lives. We all have normative foundations; what differs is that we do not all share the same one. The question, therefore, is not to eliminate normativity but to negotiate these differences. I would insist that I am deeply interested in questions of normativity. Sometimes people assume that postcritique is concerned only with the "positive" in the sense of affect or emotion, but the positive is also normative.

Shi: Finally, as these debates about critique and postcritique keep going, what do you hope literary scholars keep in mind when they think about reading and the social role of literary studies today?

Felski: I hope scholars stay aware that literature matters to people's lives in many different ways. Literary studies has long been strong at critique, but sometimes it pays less attention to other parts of reading—the attachments, the pleasures, and the moments of recognition that shape how we connect with texts. If postcritique has any value, it lies in encouraging a broader view of reading—one that invites us to acknowledge both interpretation and experience, both analysis and attachment. In the end, I think literary studies means something when it keeps asking why literature matters and how it reaches readers outside of the academy.

Shi: Thank you so much for your time and for this thought-provoking conversation.

Felski: You're welcome. I actually enjoy talking about works.

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