

To Write or Not to Write: The Woman Writer, Women's Stories and Feminist Consciousness

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Abstract:

Women's creativity has traditionally been suppressed, undervalued or ignored, and therefore, women writers had to evolve strategies to express themselves in a male-dominated culture. The Second Wave of feminism in the late 1960s encouraged and motivated women to give rein to their creativity and create conducive conditions for the publication of their creative writings. Feminist criticism has always been interested in the women who write, the context in which they write, and also in what helps or hinders their writing. The present paper analyses the woman writer and the role of feminist consciousness in the development of her creative imagination and its manifestation in her stories.

Key Words: Feminism, feminist consciousness, women's creativity, patriarchy.

Introduction:

"A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" states Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a feminist classic that has inspired millions of women. Virginia Woolf's critique of the prejudices that literary women have had to face through the ages, has to be read against the context of the restrictions that women had endured for centuries. Woolf laid emphasis on education and experience as the necessary conditions for women's cultural and intellectual life. Since women were denied access to the same opportunities as men and were restricted to the domestic sphere, they could not boast of any contribution to literature, history, science, politics, or any other field in the public sphere. This denial was one of the ways in which patriarchal society could perpetuate the subjugation of women.

Women, Creativity, and Patriarchal Culture:

The denial of the right to education, to possess property, and to vote, are all examples of the way women were prevented from improving their lot. As Joanna Russ (1983) argues, "If certain people are not supposed to have the ability to produce 'great literature', and if this one supposition is one of the means used to keep such people in their place, the ideal situation . . . is one in which such people are prevented from producing any literature at all (4)." In case, they did produce literature, "various strategies for ignoring, condemning or belittling the artistic works that result" were developed (Russ, *How* 5). This has been the lot of women writers who have expressed themselves in literature.

Environment and the social sphere become far more significant determinants of literary capacity and production than any concept of creativity as a purely personal property. A

survey of the literature written in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, shows that very few women - except the aristocratic Lady Winchelsea; Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle; and Aphra Behn, a dramatist, poet and novelist - had written any literature. It was in the nineteenth-century that the middle-class woman began to write – an event that was, according to Woolf, “of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses” (*Room 72*) Interestingly, the novel was the most popular form to be chosen by the women writers of the nineteenth-century. According to Josephine Donovan (1980), one of the most important reasons for this choice was the fact that until the nineteenth century, women were denied access to formal education and training in Latin and hence to the symbolic tools to create art and literature. It was only when the Latin influence had weakened and when writing in the vernaculars and in non-traditional forms was encouraged, that women could hope to have “equal access to the means of literary creation” (qtd. in Rakow 283).

However, in spite of showing a remarkable capacity for prodigious writing, the works of women writers were dismissed as being trivial and worthless, and denied entry into the literary canon. Writers like the Bronte sisters had to publish their masterpieces under male pseudonyms, fearing that their manuscripts would be rejected on the basis of their gender. In 1837, Charlotte Bronte had sent a few of her poems to Robert Southey, the then poet laureate, for his opinion on them. This was ten years before her *Jane Eyre* (1847) was published. Southey tried to dissuade her from writing. In a kindly worded letter, advising against women pursuing a career in writing, he wrote, “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation” (M. Smith *Letters* 166-167). Kate Chopin had to face furious reviews, social ostracism and public excoriation after her book *The Awakening* was published in 1899. Disheartened, she gave up her writing. All these and more are what Russ terms as the “patterns in the suppression of women’s writing”(How 5).

Need for women writers as role models:

Russ emphasizes the importance of models for any artist in his/her development, especially to aspiring women artists, because they act “as guides to action and as indications of possibility.” She argues, “Without models, it’s hard to work; without a context, difficult to evaluate; without peers, nearly impossible to speak” (*How* 95). Since women have traditionally and continuously been discouraged from any creative endeavours, they are more in need of models who can show them that their gender does not preclude them from using the literary imagination and also give them the assurance that their efforts at creating art would be of value.

Elaine Showalter’s essay “Women and the Literary Curriculum” (1971) refers to the nominal presence of women writers in the literary canon. Showalter notes that while still a student at a women’s college, she had been struck by the fact that out of the three hundred and thirteen writers prescribed in all the twenty-one courses given by the Department of English, only seventeen were women (“Women” 318). In a similar vein, Claudia Van Gerven, in her essay “Lost Literary Traditions: A Matter of Influence,” refers to the fact that the inclusion of only a few women, even though they may be the most extraordinary women, “distorts the

relevance of those few women” since they seem “odd, unconventional, and therefore, a little trivial” (qtd. in Russ *How* 80) This is because the isolation of any woman writer from the works of her generation or the succeeding ones leads to the severing of all connection between women writers. As Joanna Russ points out: “When the memory of one’s predecessors is buried, the assumption persists that there were none and each generation of women believes itself to be faced with the burden of doing everything for the first time” (*How* 93)

The Second Wave of feminism and its aftermath:

It was only after the Second Wave of feminism in the late 1960s that women writers began to devise or evolve strategies in order to write and be published in a male-dominated society. The women’s liberation movement brought about revolutionary changes in the social, political, economic, psychological and cultural lives of both women and men. From the beginning, the unity of the Women’s Movement was assumed to derive from a potential identity among women. According to Rosalind Delmar (1986), this concept of identity rested on the idea that women share the same experiences: “an external situation in which they find themselves – economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination are examples; and an internal response – the feeling of inadequacy, a sense of narrow horizons” (Delmar 10). Therefore, a shared response to shared experience was considered to be the basis for a commonality of feeling among women.

Believing that the “Personal is Political,” the women at the forefront of the movement recognized the importance of giving expression to this commonality of feeling and experience. Since a lot of emphasis has always been laid on feminism as consciousness, feminist literary theory and criticism aimed at awakening the consciousness of women writers, readers and critics, and motivating them to join the movement. Women writers, who were looking for suitable role-models and validation for their themes and styles, found that women critics were paving the way for them with their critical theories.

The role of feminist criticism:

The long dead or sleeping consciousness of millions of women was awakening only then and this awakening had “a collective reality” as women were becoming conscious of their oppression in a society and culture that was inscribed by patriarchy, according to Adrienne Rich (1972). Women needed to understand or know themselves and this was possible only when they could understand the assumptions in which they were “drenched”. Second wave feminism is often characterized as “the break with the fathers” (Humm 47). Some of the most important works which aimed to awaken women were Ellman’s *Thinking about Women* (1968), Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1971). These critics focused on the sexist vocabulary and gender stereotypes found in the work of male authors canonised by the literary and academic establishment like Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Arthur Mailer, and D.H. Lawrence, among others.

In the 1970s, feminist criticism entered the next phase with critics like Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter taking up the study of women writers and women identified themes. These

critics focused on tracing a female tradition and a female subculture in the literature of the nineteenth-century (Moers 1976; Showalter 1977). Moers's *Literary Women* (1976) is a celebration of the women writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is an important work in feminist criticism because it gives women writers a history. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of One's Own* (1977) unearths the long-lost and undervalued works of lesser-known women writers of the Victorian period. In addition, Showalter proposes a new three-stage process for the history of women's writing which she terms as a growth into consciousness: feminine, feminist and female. She identifies these three stages as the feminine (1840-1880); the feminist (1880-1920); and the female (1920 to the present). Showalter describes the 'feminine phase' as a long period characterized by "imitation" and "internalization," that is, the women writers of this phase imitated existing modes of the dominant or male tradition and internalized its standards of art and views of social roles. In the second phase - which, according to Showalter, ended with the winning of the women's vote in 1920 - women writers protested against these standards and values and fought for rights and autonomy. The third phase is called a phase of "self-discovery" when women writers turned inward in a search for autonomy (*Literature* 11).

Building on the work of Moers and Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), focused on a psychoanalytical study of women writers. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the existing male model of the androcentric paradigm described by Harold Bloom in which literary sons suffer an anxiety of authorship and Oedipal struggle with male precursors does not hold good for the female artist or writer. The woman writer experiences an even more primary "anxiety of authorship" - a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor," the act of writing would isolate or destroy her (Gilbert & Gubar 48-49). Gilbert and Gubar point out that this fear about her ability to create is the consequence of a socialization which has been "self-reducing, even, self-annihilating" and that in order to write she has to "redefine the terms of her socialization" (49).

The Woman Writer and Feminist Consciousness:

In her magnum opus, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (293) This statement is the best-remembered and most-quoted line from the book which is considered to be a landmark in the history of feminism. De Beauvoir's argument that femininity is a construction of society and that it does not originate from some essential quality in a woman went on to become one of the major underpinnings of the women's movement. The idea that femininity does not arise from biology or psychology buttressed the feminist struggle for equality in all walks of life. When the second wave of feminism began, the women involved in the organization of the movement knew that they needed to make fellow women realize the extent to which they had been socialized in a patriarchal society.

Sandra Lee Bartky (1975) takes Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman", and modifies it to suit her argument that feminists have to be made, that is, they have to consciously become feminists. According to Bartky, "To be a feminist, one has to first become one. For many feminists, this involves the experience of a profound personal transformation, an experience which goes far beyond that sphere of human activity

we regard ordinarily as ‘political’ . . . to become a feminist is to develop a radically altered consciousness of oneself, of others, and of . . . ‘social reality’ (425). Bartky, therefore, emphasises the importance of a “radically altered consciousness” to become a feminist.

However, creating this consciousness was a struggle in itself. Gerda Lerner (1993), a pioneering women’s historian and long-time peace and civil rights activist, points out that women had to struggle to form their own feminist consciousness under patriarchal hegemony in thought, values, institutions and resources. She defines ‘feminist consciousness’, as the “(A)wareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but is societally determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternative vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self- determination” (Lerner 14).

Since mere awareness of their condition would not bring about any change in this condition, women began to organize in small groups to talk about their personal experiences. According to bell hooks (2000), women had to first change themselves if they wanted to change patriarchy and in order to do this they had to raise their consciousness. hooks writes, “(F)eminist consciousness-raising emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it is perpetuated and maintained. Understanding the way male domination and sexism was expressed in everyday life created awareness in women of the ways we were victimized, exploited, and in worse case scenarios, oppressed” (hooks 7).

Feminist consciousness, then, as understood from the writings of Lerner, Bartky and hooks, involves the awareness of the past in order to understand the present and thereby attempt to bring about a change in the future. As Bartky explains, “We understand what we are and where we are in the light of what we are not yet. But the perspective from which I understand the world must be rooted in the world too. My comprehension of what I and my world can become must take account of what they *are*” (429). Feminist consciousness, then, consists of an awareness of the current situation as being contradictory, unstable and “carrying within itself the seeds of its dissolution” (Bartky 429). This awareness, in turn, would result in the perception that as the current situation is not fixed, it is changeable and would lead to the possibility of a transformed society.

Women writers and their stories:

When women writers began to write with a consciousness that was altered by their awareness of feminist ideology, their stories were mostly concerned with a quest for autonomy and self-identity. Judith Kegan Gardiner (1981) states, “The woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character.” Gardiner believes that “the text and its female hero begin as narcissistic extensions of the author” and that “the author shapes her character according to literary convention and social reality as well as according to projections of her representations of herself.” In other words, according to Gardiner, the text becomes the medium through which the author defines herself while creating her female hero (357).

Following a similar line of argument, Yvonne Tasker (1998) observes that one of the most typical features of women's fiction is the female protagonist's journey to self-discovery, in which the heroine progresses from ignorance to a knowledge of self and a position of strength. According to her, "(s)ince the politicising of the personal was central to the women's movement of the 1970s, the investigation of the self, forms a privileged narrative within feminist discourses" (Tasker 331). The journey of the female protagonist, therefore, is also intimately connected with the journey of the woman writer whose imagination has created the female protagonist.

Conclusion:

The woman writer had to struggle to overcome the detrimental effects of a socialization in a patriarchal system that denied her a legitimate and empowering selfhood or identity, and constrained her literary aspirations. The Second Wave of feminism which aimed to make women aware of their oppression stressed on the need to develop a feminist consciousness in them. Therefore, the woman writer's feminist consciousness shapes and influences her creative imagination, and the stories produced by this imagination would reflect the changes in the woman writer's feminist consciousness and would be part of a continuing process that would involve self-definition and empathic identification with her character.

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