

FEMINIST GIANTS: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FEMINIST CANON BY FAMOUS SELECTED THEORISTS

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ABSTRACT: *The paper explores the pivotal contribution made to the feminist canon by some famous Anglo-American, African-American and French theorists. In particular, the paper discusses the principal feminist arguments made by Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, Simon De Beauvoir, Helen Cixous, and Elaine Showalter. Each theorist has significantly added to the agenda of the feminist discipline, and thus evidently contributed to the transformation the discipline has witnessed so far. The paper highlights this contribution by investigating the major concepts and ideas proposed by those writers, and attempts to pinpoint similarities and differences among them, when applicable.*

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Literary Criticism, Anglo-American

INTRODUCTION

The feminist canon has brought about a number of women writers and theorists who significantly contributed to the establishment and development of the field. These women literary giants gave feminism a new direction, each with her peculiar outlook and methodology. Incidentally, the patriarchal oppression and discrimination that these writers fought contributed to shaping their characters and better equipped them articulate women's needs. In fact, their writings proved that women indeed possess every endowment that would empower them to be on equal footing with man. Within this context, this paper aims at exploring the contributions of some premier feminist writers who provided the framework for the emergence and development of feminist theory, highlighting their similarities and differences. The paper will particular focus on the writings of Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, Simone de Beauvoir, Helen Cixous and Elaine Showalter.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf focuses on the issue of women writers and argues that the marked absence of women's voices and writings came as a result of depriving women of the space, privacy, education as well as sufficient income necessary to undertake their literary endeavors. She argues that, throughout history, women did not have the freedom and financial support that would give them the opportunity to exhibit their creativity. Hence, Woolf proposes her famous statement that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). She stresses the importance of financial self-sufficiency as a prerequisite for women to realize their intellectual freedom and create literature.

The story Woolf tells about the fictitious Judith Shakespeare provides a cogent evidence for the argument she provided regarding the necessity of a room and financial support for women to be able to write. Woolf views that the situation and destiny of women writers is similar to that of Judith. Their talent is inhibited by the lack of privacy, property and money. If no improvement is achieved, their only choice remaining is suicide. A link can be drawn here to women's fiction in which the patriarchal oppression drives women to madness and suicide.

Woolf's argument concords with that proposed by the famous American feminist, Alice Walker. Like Woolf, who calls for a "room" for women to be able to write, Walker, in her *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, invokes the image of "our mothers' garden" that inspires women and endows them with agency. In addition, just like Woolf employs the figure of Judith Shakespeare to substantiate her argument, Walker uses the example of Phyllis Wheatley for the same purpose. For Walker, if Wheatley had the freedom enough to show her talent, she would have gained a voice in the literary canon.

Despite these similarities, the two feminist writers differ in certain aspects of their approach women's issue. For example, Walker strongly criticizes Woolf for her negligence of black women case. In turn, although Walker's argument essentially targets the African-American women, her message is rather universal. She addresses all women, regardless of race or color. Moreover, whereas Woolf emphasized the need of female financial power and independence in order for her to be able to write, Walker strongly belief that indeed women had the creative ability even within racial and gender bondage.

In addition, compared to the bemoaning tone found in Woolf's writings, what characterizes Walker's text is the degree of celebration of African-American women's power to sustain their creativity despite the racism, discrimination and humiliation they have faced. It is this ability which made them create a great tradition that passed from generation to generation. That is why Walker's text offers hope and inspiration for more freedom and opportunities for women. In this regard, Walker coins the concept of "womanism," which underscores women's solidarity and power.

This explicates Walker's view of the black woman gaining her strength through fostering relationships with other women to overcome the double oppression they face. Walker draws on examples of female figures to validate her proposition. Most notably, she uses the example of her mother; She writes: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (1983, 243). She views that recognizing the significance of her mother and other similar women model is vital for women in their journey for recognition. For Walker, "to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mothers' names" (2004, 106)

Similar to Walker, Simon de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, uses an example from her own life in order to elaborate on the issue of inequality between sexes, and examines the sources that maintain its prevalence. Additionally, De Beauvoir deploys the concept of the "Other" signifying the subordinate situation of women in relation to men. Within this scheme, the man is regarded as the subject, the woman as the object. In surrendering to this role, the woman compromises her identity, freedom and humanity.

In investigating the reasons for such a position of the woman, de Beauvoir refers to many factors that contribute to the "othering" of the woman. She contends that all these factors have been the product of the patriarchal society, and that is why she strongly believes that "the whole of feminine history has been man-made" (144). Even the mere fact that women are biologically weaker than men is the product of men's agenda. This weakness "is revealed as such only in light of the ends man proposes, the instruments he has available, the law he establishes" (38)

This links to de Beauvoir major contribution to the feminist field; namely the repudiation of any essentialist view of gender construction. For Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). It is the patriarchal society that sets the definition of the female as

simple, obedient and docile and establishes the parameters for “the eternal feminine.” This underscores the fact that women have assimilated the patriarchal dictates about femininity so much so that they enjoyed the “bad faith” that forms these dictates. In this sense, women became implicated in their own subjugation.

Here comes de Beauvoir’s answer for the question “How can a human being in a woman’s situation attain fulfillment?” (47). For de Beauvoir, in order to attain self-fulfillment, women should repudiate the principle of “bad faith” in order to reach a satisfactory sense of the self. In addition, adhering to the belief in the differences between the sexes, Beauvoir proposes that for women to seek freedom they should not seek to be identical to man. Rather, she looks forward to a world where men and women share a mutual respect and at the same time recognizing their difference within the frame of equality.

De Beauvoir’s colleague, Helen Cixous, goes beyond the mere call for giving more opportunities for women writers. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous locates the reasons of women’s oppression in the masculinist mentality that governs the European culture. For Cixous, it is this system of patriarchal thought that impedes women opportunities. Taking Freud as her first step, Cixous subverts his model of “penis envy.” She argues that viewing “the phallus as the symbol and source of power” authenticates the subservient role of women in relation to men (2040). Thus for women to gain a voice in society, they should “write about women and bring women to writing” through writing with their own bodies (2039).

Cixous claims that women have been trained to negate and hide their bodies by virtue of what she terms as the “superegoized structure.” The patriarchal society instills in women the feeling of “guilt” regarding their body and sexuality in order to hinder them from expressing their bodies and desires. In return, Cixous contends that an exploration of the female body with words would change gender constructions in language and creates multiple languages for women to express themselves. Thus, she exhorts women to write their bodies and sexualities freely.

To this end, Cixous proposed the model of *Ecriture feminine* in which women use their body as a tool for writing. This feminine discourse is set in opposition to the masculine discourse that supports the “phallogentric” system. By writing through the female body, women underscore the significance of the phallus and its abominable ramifications on women’s status. Within this discourse, the woman becomes the subject of the text rather than the object. In addition, using the image of the “white ink,” that characterizes women’s method of writing, Cixous emphasizes the vitalizing nature of women’s discourse as opposed to the debilitating aspect of males’ writings.

Cixous’ model represents an example on fighting patriarchy from within its own discourse. Within this model, the female body, which has always been a source of entrapment for women, is employed as a means of emancipation from the patriarchal limitations. In addition, the idea of the lack of the penis is turned into a source of power. Employing the female body as a means for writing in opposition to men’s celebration of the penis underscores Cixous’ subversion of the male sexuality and discourse.

In contrast to this radical French feminist stand, Elaine Showalter’s argument proposed in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” demonstrates the more “benign” American strand of feminism. Evidently, Showalter’s feminism is a practical one. First and foremost, she rejects any kind of categorization or definition for feminism that may limit its scope. She locates the

major concern of feminism in repudiating the patriarchal hegemony. Thus, for Showalter, the feminists' mission should focus on achieving some sort of change that may contribute to establishing this equality to putting an end to the miserable situation of women.

Additionally, Showalter adheres to the belief in the difference between the two sexes. This difference is not only a question of gender or sex; rather it is also manifest in cultural, racial and class differences. Believing in the peculiar experience of women, Showalter acknowledges the existence of a distinct mode of women writings that is a result of this experience. She uses the term "gynocritics" to denote those feminist who are interested in examining the experiences of women writers in particular.

Showalter stresses that despite the existence of a peculiar nature of women's literary tradition, women should not work out their feminist agenda in a separate sphere. In their search for emancipation and freedom, women should work from within the dominant ideology. This is because of the clear impossibility and futility of locating women's experience and discourse in a separate terrain. She clearly declares that "all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it (200)"

To recapitulate, the preceding argument outlines different strands of the feminist theory. Woolf feminism is fundamentally based on the notion that creativity and imagination are genderless, and all the woman writer needs is a space of her own and financial sufficiency in order to engage her creativity and kill the angel in the house. Walker's feminist stand, on the other hand, is deeply interwoven with aspects of race and culture. She celebrates the image of the black woman, who exercises her freedom through creativity within the space provided for her by a racial and gendered society. Showalter observes that as feminist theory is characterized by a refusal to be confined and encoded with specific parameters. Cixous, on the other hand, reasserts this notion by suggesting that feminism should deconstruct the world created to confine them by male patriarchy. This, as Beauvoir suggests, will occur when women break free from the social commands of becoming a woman.

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