

THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE WRITERS IN THE 20TH CENTURY: FROM THE LATE 19TH CENTURY TOWARDS 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: This article gives an overview of writing by women in a revolutionary phase during the twentieth century and highlights the distinguished features of twentieth century women's literature including the diverse range of themes, change in women's social and family roles, a remarkable shift in subjects of writing which added a new frontier in women's writing. While contemplating the study of twentieth century women's literature, the most significant features that came under the spotlight include discovery of women's self- identity, women coming out from the male defined precincts to achieve independence and the authors' expedition towards autonomy and self-assertion through their writing. However, to trace the growth twentieth century women's literature has witnessed, a comparative investigation of Victorian and twentieth century women's literature has been stated briefly.

Key words: modernist women's literature, feminism, female protagonist, stream of consciousness, male pseudonym, autonomy, self-assertion.

INTRODUCTION

The year 1900 to 2000 was a very exciting time for female novelist. Female writers have been around for as long as literature has existed but 20th century novel produced by women were unique to any other time period as it was the first time since literature began that women not only tackled issues concerning women that were considered controversial like sexuality and feminism but also did so in a way that put the reader in the mindset of the female protagonist.

Kathleen Wheeler's critical guide gives us the list of women novelists all over the English-speaking world with the literary movements they belong to in the 20th century. The years 1895-1925 indicates new forms of realism and the rise of early modernism, expressing the influence of psychological writings on literature, includes these novelists - Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Olive Schreiner, Vernon Lee, Barbara Baynton, George Egerton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, May Sinclair, Henry Handel Richardson, Willa Cather, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Catherine Carswell, Miles Franklin, Radclyffe Hall, Rose Macaulay, Susan Glaspell, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Anna Yeziarska, Hilda Doolittle (HD), Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

High modernism, other experiments and the continuing development of the socio-moral novel, 1918-1925: modernism and stream of consciousness fiction are conveyed by the following female writers - Mary Ellen Glasgow, Julia M. Peterkin, Jesse Fauset, Pauline Smith, Frances Newman, Virginia Woolf, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), Katharine Anne Porter, Jean Rhys, Zora Neale Hurston, Djuna Barnes, Dorothy Parker, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Kate O'Brien, Winifred Holtby, Elizabeth Bowen, Zelda Fitzgerald, Eleanor Dark, Rosamund Lehman, Stevie Smith, Christina Stead, Kay Boyle, Anais Nin, Molly Keane.

Neo-realism, the post-war novel, and early-post-modernist innovations can be seen during 1944-1975 with the new international literatures in English by the novelists: Anna Kavan, Jessamyn West, Martha Gellhorn, Ann Petry, Eudora Welty, Marguerite Young, Hortense Calisher, Kylie Tennant, Tillie Olsen, Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Smart, Jean Stafford, Margaret Walker, Elizabeth Hardwick, Jane

Bowles, Leonora Carrington, Carson McCullers, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Spencer, Mavis Gallant, Nadine Gordimer, Janet Frame, Kamal Markhandaya, Flannery O'Connor, Margaret Laurence, Harper Lee, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Edna O'Brien, Susan Sontag, Ann Quin.

Further internationalism, diversification, and experimentation, 1970-1995: post-structuralist theory and fiction introduction to novelists, 1970-1995 entries - Meridel Le Sueur, Grace Paley, Elizabeth Jolley, Alison Lurie, Christine Brooke-Rose, Anita Brookner, Jane Gardam, Cynthia Ozick, Paule Marshall, Ursula Le Guin, Jennifer Johnston, Toni Cade Bambara, Shirley Hazzard, Toni Morrison, Alice Munro, Fay Weldon, Alice Thomas Ellis, Eva Figs, Miriam Masoli. Antonia Byatt.

At the end of the nineteenth century, writers such as Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were already writing about women seeking lives outside traditional feminine norms. It is impossible, indeed, to trace developments in twentieth-century women's writing without considering one of the most important texts produced by an American woman in the late nineteenth century: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, is dissatisfied with marriage, children, her home, and the stifling codes of a society that refuses to acknowledge women as creative, sexual beings. In response to her confining world, Edna is driven on a quest for autonomy, solitude, and self-discovery. This radical pursuit ultimately leads Edna to swim into the ocean until her strength leaves her. Because nineteenth-century writing, and by extension society, offered no effective narrative solutions to Edna's struggle to achieve selfhood, Chopin's protagonist drowns.

Although Edna's search for autonomy in a society hostile to women's independence ends with her drowning, each successive generation of women

writers push Edna further and further to the shore of self-discovery. As the twentieth century progresses, the voices of women become louder and more artistically innovative. In the twentieth century, women's writing travels a course in which each generation of female character's progresses toward vital and independent lives, free from society's traditional limitations. From Lily Bart's death, hastened by her resistance to society's marital expectations, in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905) to Sethe's escape from slavery into selfhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), women writing fiction in the twentieth century created textual reflections of women's positions in American culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Women have long had a presence in British literature, but this was largely forgotten by the mid-20th century and so had to be recovered. Since the 18th century, for instance, some educated women with dependents wrote to avoid destitution and the workhouse. Aphra Benn (1640–89) was one of the first women writers to earn her living by her pen, opening the door to other professional women writers in the 18th century. Most famously, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot shaped 18th- and 19th-century literature, and the opinions of the readers who read their work. It is a sign of the patriarchal society of the time that Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot both used male pseudonyms under which to publish their work: Charlotte Brontë wrote initially as Currer Bell, while George Eliot's real name was Mary Anne Evans. Female authors such as Virginia Woolf led the way to modernism and the reinvention of the novel in the early 20th century. Woolf famously claimed that a woman needed a room of her own and £500 a year to write.

The classic Victorian literary works by renowned women authors like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, circled mostly around

themes of love, family, relationships, religion, whereas twentieth century women authors brought loneliness, confinement, personal relationships, rape, patriarchal tyranny, neurosis, psychological disorder, identity crisis, nationality, post-colonial experience in their writing. A demonstration of Victorian classic literature and modern twentieth century women's literature would help us to draw a distinction between these two genres. The Victorian novels like *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte and few other women-centered novels depicted the themes of marriage, love, goodness, the role of a perfect wife or an ideal homemaker, revenge, virtue and ethics, family and religion whereas twentieth century women's literature witnessed the most vivid and flamboyant range of themes, motifs and representation.

Twentieth century women authors stood up against the age-old male representations of women through their pioneering literature. The shift in themes allowed women to express their inner selves which eventually lead them to be vocal about their rights as well as paving a way towards individual independence. However, the journey of independence came hand in hand with women's education and enlightenment as twentieth century women started pursuing higher education. An educated, learned and progressive branch of women writers, activists, thinkers and philosophers embarked on an expedition unleashing the shackles of male dominance to assert their identity and selfhood. Even so, in this new journey, women authors came across a gallant group of feminist critics, writers and activists namely Elaine Showalter, Susan Gubar, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Caroline Heilbrun and few others who helped in forming a new hypothesis for modern feminism. With the belief that "a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful works", Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Isak Dinesen started constructing a new pathway establishing androgyny in women's

literature. Dinesen adopts the pseudonym of Isak Dinesen, keeping her real name Karen Blixen secret, to reach a diverse and extensive range of readers around the world. Many people of that age actually found it difficult to identify the gender of the author when they came across the name Isak Dinesen, thus again asserting the fact that a great author must contain an "androgynous mind" as illustrated in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. It is noteworthy that the majority of the leading twentieth century women authors have gone through resentment, complexity and psychological violence in their lives which ultimately revolutionized modern women's literature. Sylvia Plath becomes a prolific poet with her experimental styles, Jean Rhys exercises autobiographical writing as a critic of racial and gender discrimination, Katherine Mansfield creates open-ended, expansible, resilient short stories expressing the inner self of the women characters.

In her novel *Mrs Dalloway* by featuring their internal feelings, Woolf allows her characters' thoughts to travel back and forth in time, reflecting and refracting their emotional experiences. This device, often known as 'stream of consciousness', creates complex portraits of the individuals and their relationships. Woolf also uses the novel as a vehicle for criticism of the society of her day.

'Stream of consciousness' is a style of writing evolved by authors in the early 20th century to express the flow of a character's thoughts and feelings. The technique aims to give readers the impression of being inside the mind of the character - an internal view that illuminates plot and motivation as well as non-linear time, psychological complexity and the fragmented experience of living in the modern world. Thoughts spoken aloud are not always the same as those 'on the floor of the mind', as Woolf put it. The term was first used in a literary sense by May Sinclair in her 1918 review of a novel by Dorothy Richardson. Other authors

well known for this style include Katherine Mansfield, William Faulkner and James Joyce.

Modern and post-modern works often use inner dialogue and stream-of-conscious narrative that was not evident in the works of the past. Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" is told from the perspectives of Lockwood and Nelly, who provides narration for other characters to tell their stories (L.C. English, n.d.). Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay" is written from her personal perspective with inner dialogue and reflection characteristic to modernism and post-modernism [2].

CONCLUSION

The use of male pseudonyms is common for contemporary women writers as well, such as for Alice Bradley Sheldon (James Tiptree) and Joanne Rowling (J.K. Rowling). Sheldon, author of *Star Songs of an Old Primate* (1978), wrote under the name James Triptree in order to publish her work in the male dominated literary genre of science fiction. Before her death in 1987, Sheldon expressed her reasons for choosing an alternative name: "A male name seemed like good camouflage. I had the feeling that a man would slip by less observed. I've had too many experiences in my life of being the first woman in some damned occupation". However, Joanne Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, was urged to change her name to 'J.K.' Rowling by her publishers. The publishers claimed that Rowling would not attract enough young boys—who were the target audience—if they knew a woman had written the series. Although roughly two centuries have passed since the Victorian era, it is clear that women writers still struggle for recognition and acknowledgement, especially in the literary genres where men appear more dominant than women.

In brief, twentieth century witnessed the most autonomous and liberating pieces of literary texts by self-assertive women authors which ultimately redefined and

reshaped women's literature. Considering the nature, uniqueness and distinctiveness of twentieth century women's literature, it can undoubtedly be said that the march towards self-assertion begins from this century and eventually this leads a path towards women's autonomy and emancipation.

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