

Construction of Female Self in the Madwoman in the Attic

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to look at the power relationship within feminism from the point of view of race and colonialism. Gilbert and Gubar's concern in this work like that of Showalter's is the construction of a feminist poetics. Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* represents for them the symbol of confinement and revolt. They show in this book that women writers are working from within a male vision of creativity. They show in their book that woman is not what she really is but as she fills the male's dream. Women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them. To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. The female textual strategy, as they see it, consists in assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially.

Keywords: Feminism, Race, Gender, Patriarchy, Self.

Introduction

Gilbert and Gubar's concern in this work like that of Showalter's is the construction of a feminist poetics. It leads them to redefinitions of subjectivity and feminist literary criticism because as they assert that

...for all literary artists self-definitions necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' can not be altered if the 'I' knows not what it is. (Rivkin 96)

Woman writers are working from within a male vision of creativity. Woman is not what she really is but as she fills the male's dream. Gilbert and Gubar argue, like that of Simone de Beauvoir that the category of the other is fundamental in the formation of all human subjectivity; since our sense of self can be produced only in opposition to something which is not self. But men have claimed the category of self or subject exclusively for themselves, and relegated, woman to the status of eternal other. The category woman has thus no substance, being merely a projection of male fanancies. Women have internalized these definitions and learned to "dream through the dreams of men." (Beauvoir 123)

Gilbert and Gubar argue that the madwoman image in most fiction by the women authors represented their (the author's) double, the 'schizophrenia of authorship', and the anxiety/rage of creation. They comment:

By the projection of rebellious impulses into mad/monstrous women, the female authors of the nineteenth century "dramatize their own self-division, their desire to both accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them'. (Rivkin 97)

Bertha Rochester represents for them the symbol of confinement and revolt. Therefore, Gilbert and Gubar hold the views that before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass towards literary autonomy, she must come to terms with images on the surface of the glass, with that is, those mythic masks that male artists have fastened over her human face, both to lessen their dread of her "inconsistency" and by identifying her with the "eternal type". They have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly. In simple words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been killed into art:

...before women can write they must "kill" the angel in the house. For the feminist critics however, the Woolfian act of "killing" both angels and monsters must here begin with an understanding of the nature and origin of these images. (Rivkin 97)

Gilbert and Gubar's enquiry shows that in the nineteenth century (as still today) the dominant patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality. The writer 'fathers' his text; in the image of the Divine creator he becomes the Author-the sole origin and meaning of his work. Gilbert and Gubar then ask the crucial question: What if such a



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proudly masculine cosmic Author is the sole legitimate model for all early author's? Their answer is that since this is indeed the case under patriarchy, creative women have a rough time coping with the consequences of such a phallogocentric myth of creativity:

Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which defining them as 'Cyphers', deny them the autonomy to fortunate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting pen. (Rivkin 98)

Since creativity is defined as male, it follows that the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too. Women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them. Gilbert and Gubar clearly demonstrate how in the nineteenth century the 'eternal feminine' was assumed to be a vision of angelic beauty and sweetness: from Dante's Beatrice and Goethe's Gretchen and Makarie to Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House, the ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile and above all selfless creativity. The authors stingingly comment that:

To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, like the life of Goethe's Makarie, is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of 'contemplative purity' evokes finally, both heaven and the grave. (Rivkin 98)

The monster woman for Gilbert and Gubar is duplicitous, precisely because she has something to tell, there is always the possibility that she may choose not to tell or to tell a different story. The duplicitous woman is the one whose consciousness is opaque to man, whose mind will not let itself be penetrated by the phallic probings of masculine thought.

The authors of "The Madwoman in the Attic" then turn to the situation of the woman artist under patriarchy.

For the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself. (Rivkin 99)

The female textual strategy, as they see it, consists in assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially. The paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster. Women writers, in order to be true to themselves, must transcend these extreme images, which male authors have generated for them.

Gilbert and Gubar celebrate Jane as a proto-feminist heroine in an otherwise patriarchal and oppressive world but they leave out the colonial context of the text in their reading as Spivak points out in her essay "Three women's text and A Critique of Imperialism" that Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha Rochester always in relation to Jane and never as an

REMARKING : VOL-1 * ISSUE-9*February-2015 individual self in her own right. In their words Bertha is Jane's

trust and darkest double she is the angry aspect of the orphan child the ferocious secret self that Jane has been trying to repress every since her days at Galeshead. (Rivkin 99)

Bertha is robbed of human selfhood; she has no choice in the novel other than the demoniac laughter and the discomfoting noises that Jane reports-whether beast or human being, one could not at first right tell. Her animalistic character disqualifies her from the journey of human self-determination for which Jane is celebrated by Anglo-American feminist critics. Spivak writes:

Bertha is always connected to Jane as an 'other'. She never achieves any self of her own. Jane's Journey to self-fulfilment and her happy marriage are achieved at the cost of Bertha's human selfhood and, ultimately, her life. (Gates 264)

Therefore, Gilbert and Gubar's reading of Jane Eyre leaves out the colonial context of Bertha's imprisonment and fails to examine some of the assumptions concerning Bertha's lunacy and her representation in terms of race.

Nevertheless "The Madwoman in the Attic" remains one of the most powerful critique of feminism arguing that a liberated woman must reject the stereotype of "universal femininity", she must overcome the disabilities she experiences in reproduction and sex. She must refuse the role of passive object and lay claim to existential freedom. It is only by doing this that women can grasp the subjecthood they have been so far denied. This done, an 'inner metamorphosis' will follow. Women will exist for herself : she will be a subject as man is a subject an other for him only so far as he is for her. This will "free the half of the humanity from its immemorial subordination." (Moi 64)

Therefore, the female textual strategy, as Gilbert and Gubar see it, consists in assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male polarities of angel and monster. Women writers, in order to be true to themselves, must transcend these extreme images, which male authors have generated for them.

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