

The Knowledge of an Author's Gender Influences the Way in Which Their Work Is Read and How Might Feminist Reading/Writing Practices Address This Influence

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Abstract

The essay will discover discussions of how knowledge of the author's gender affects readers and how the social construction of gender roles also impacts on literary work. Texts written by women tend to be treated like women themselves who in many societies worldwide are marginalised. Men tend to maintain power through text and showing a negative image of women. Readers start sharing the values of the text through reading. This implies that negative views or images of women or men can actually impact on the reader- how the reader comes to understand and identify with the written text.

In addition, the essay will try to react to the negative images of women portrayed in literary work, feminist literary criticism imaged to highlight the negative perceptions of women. and how the feminism contributed to redressing the disparity between men and women in literary work by emphasising the importance of understanding gender inequalities and ways of dealing with these injustices embedded in the culturally constructed thinking of the differences between male and female.

Keywords: knowledge, gender, feminist, author, influence.

1. Introduction

In literary works, gender issues are said to play a role in the production or experience of literature. As noted by Morris, it is generally believed that creative forms of writing can offer special insight into human experience and sharpen reality (Morris, 1993, p.7). the reality of gender differences can be brought to life through literary canon. This essay is an attempt to explain how knowledge of an author's gender is said to influence the way in which their work is read. In addition, the essay further discusses how feminist reading/writing practices might address this influence. As a start, a brief discussion on how knowledge of the author's gender influences the reader. Matters raised in this section will then be discussed in the context of feminism.

The knowledge of an author's gender is indeed said to influence the way their work is read. Firstly, women's literary canon is marginalised. In this vein Bennett and Royle note that, their work is marginalised simply because they are women (Bennett and Royle, 2004). According to Bortluzzi, Dixon and Sopcak, the affiliation of gender to reading still remains pronounced in literary and cultural studies despite several decades of sustained inquiry (Bortluzzi, Dixon and Sopcak, 2010). The fact that women are marginalised in society and only associated with maternal duties such as child rearing; their work is not usually viewed positively by men.

As noted by Morris, in literature, writing is regarded as a male domain, women writers are always seen as special cases, women are always seen as women first and only secondly as writers (Morris, 1993). This thinking reveals deeply held prejudices about what a woman's place is- the private domain rather than the public. According to Ellmann, there is a tendency for male critics to treat books authored by women as if the texts were women resulting in imposing on them the same stereotypes as they characterise women (Ellmann, cited in Morris, 1993). Indeed writing by women is often looked down upon in the same way women are looked down upon in society. Morris notes that writing by women is often accused of being formless, restricted, irrational, over-emotional and lacking in discipline (Morris, 1993; p.43). The thought process reflected by male authors here is very limiting of women's ability to author texts which are creative. This kind of criticism of women's texts is aimed at marginilising their writing by regarding their subject matter as being insignificant, unrepresentative, unimportant and lacking general interest(Morris, 1993).

Although, there have been great texts written by women which are praise-worthy such as the work of Emily Bronte- Wuthering Heights which men claim as having been written by her brother Branwell (Morris, 1993). This claim is clearly aimed at undermining a woman's writing and attributing this classic novel to men who are seen to be better at writing.

Secondly, as noted by Morris, in reading a text, the reader is said to construct a narrative point of view which is a powerful means by which readers are imperceptively brought to share the values of the text (Morris, 1993). Morris continues to note that, when readers take the space in the narrative referred to as the linguistic space, they gradually begin to identify with the views of the narrator. For example, in male authored texts, the attitudes and beliefs portrayed are largely male oriented. When men write a text that involves female characters, they are portrayed as symbols of sex (Morris, 1993). This is also evident in the notable piece of work written by Kate Millett in 1969 who examined how women are epitomized in text by famous men in *Sexual Politics*. For example Morris notes that, the work Millett's thesis regarding maintenance of patriarchal power is reflected in misogynistic images of women in literary texts as whores or virgins, frigid or nymphomaniac, chaste or licentious (Morris, 1993, p.150). Readers of such texts are likely to develop a mental picture of women which reinforces this patriarchal power and mental image of a woman's place in literary canon.

This implies that as readers read such texts, they are likely to identify with a male perspective portrayed in the text. Morris, agreeing with Fetterley notes that women readers, teachers and scholars, women are trained to reason like men, to share the understanding of a male point of view and to share as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny (Fetterley cited in Morris, 1993, p.28). This reveals that what such texts do is to teach readers to develop a natural hatred of women as a sexually culturally defined group of individuals. Mullins and Dixon suggest that readers typically create a mental construction of the narrator just as in conversation (Mullins and Dixon, 2007). In addition, authors such as Gibbs note that a significant constituent of language understanding is the search for the communicative meanings of the speaker or writer (Gibbs, 1999). This implies that literary text which marginalise women actually communicates the perception of stereotypical image of a woman. As rightly observed by Mullins and Dixon, 'the reader assumes that an individual produced the text for a specific set of reasons that are meant to be recognised' (Mullins and Dixon, 2007, p.263).

Thirdly, research shows that there is a tendency for readers to identify with an author of the same gender. According to Bortolussi et al, 'a core but typically implicit assumption underlying much of the feminist scholarship on male and female is what may be referred to as 'gender-match hypothesis' (Bortolussi et al., 2010, p.301). This implies that readers prefer or give a more positive evaluation to texts which are authored by protagonists of the same gender (Bortolussi et al., 2010). Further, Bortolussi and colleagues note that this inclination may be facilitated by empathising with the intuitive assumption that men are more likely to identify with male protagonists and women with female protagonists (Bortolussi et al., 2010). Readers identify with authors of the same gender. In other words, there is biasness in identifying with the author. The reader occupies a linguistic position taking the views and attitudes that go with that stance. Identifying with the male protagonists will entail adopting

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male view points and attitudes (Morris, 1993). Therefore, it can be deduced from this that, knowledge of the author's gender might lead to the reader empathising with that particular gender whether male or female.

According to Bortolussi et al., some authors have conjured the concept referred to as 'gender schemas' as a device for creating an understanding of the effects of gender on reading (Bortolussi et al., 2010). Gender schemas according to Bem comprise of contrasting traits and behaviours associated with genders (Bem, 1981). Therefore the use of gender schemas is likely to result in sex typing. Gender schemas are therefore likely to impact the reader as they identify with the narrator who- in most cases were male. Referring to the text 'Paradise Lost, Morris notes that constructing such a narrative vantage-points texts offer to readers of both sexes a vicarious and flattering experience of godlike knowledge and authority (Morris, 1993, p.29). In this regard, Morris notes that Women readers gain access to the seductive taste of power only at the cost of identifying against their own interest as women (Morris, 1993, p.29). In this case, what Morris is saying is that women may choose to lose their feminine attributes by identifying with the male attributes in the text which allows these women readers to have a taste of power, enjoying being in control as opposed to occupying the traditional subordinate role.

In taking the work of Fetterley further, Garcia (1984) argued that works of the masculine canon were out of alignment with women's real life experiences as plots are often based on heroic actions, while women are depicted in a limited number of stereotypical roles and a genuine woman's perspective is absent. Given these views, Bortolussi et al, conclude that women readers cannot identify or empathise with either male or female characters created by male authors, (Bortolussi et al., 2010).

The above discussion is an attempt to explain how knowledge of an author's gender influence the way in which their work is read. The rest of this essay is dedicated to exploring how feminist reading/writing practices address this influence. A definition of feminism at this point is fitting. According to Morris, 'Feminism is a political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not a result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences (Morris, 1993, p.4). This definition of feminism highlights the importance of understanding gender inequalities and perhaps ways of dealing with these injustices embedded in the culturally constructed thinking of the differences between male and female.

As earlier pointed out, sex categories of male or female are biologically determined, gender is determined culturally as either male or female with role expectations attached. In other words, gender is a socially constructed position. According to Morris, women have

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suffered from what can be described as biological essentialism which implies that a woman's nature is an inevitable consequence of her reproductive role (Morris, 1993). Further, Morris notes that historically or across societies, this view of essentialism is used to justify the women's subordination role, despite there being variations as to what are considered to be feminine attributes from one culture to another. In the light of this Morris notes the terms femininity and masculinity are preferred by feminists in reference to acquired cultural identity although for the majority of individuals this social and subjected sense is acquired early in life as to seem naturally coterminous with our sex (Morris, 1993; p,2).

Morris argues that not every writing by women will be essentially feminine in its perspectives and values (Morris, 1993). In addition, Morris also notes that it is also possible that a male writer may at certain times show what are culturally designated feminine characteristics in his work in the same way a female writer may exhibit masculine traits (Morris, 1993). In this regard, it is not necessarily one's gender that determines how they write or the text they use. This feminist perspective helps readers understand that how someone writes is not so much dependant on their gender.

Four contributions of dealing with the influence of knowledge of the author's gender are now discussed. Firstly, the contribution of feminism in literary studies, is that it explores the unfairness in literature which appears to favour the male gender as well as examining literature from a feminist perspective. The main aim of feminist criticism appears to be uncovering the nature of inequality and focus on analysing gender equality and advancement of women's rights. For example, the work of Virginia Woolf can be seen as a campaign for women's rights in the literary canon. Woolf gives an example of fictional tale of William Shakespeare's sister to develop her argument on how social injustice affects the life chances of the opposite sex. Although William's sister may have had high potential in writing which might be comparable to her brother, her future unfolded differently because of her gender. She had restricted education having been deprived from learning Greek unlike her brothers. She was also later, forbidden from entering the university library as this was like a male protected area. What Woolf's work does is to highlight both social and economic impediments that would stand in the way of a woman's progression.

Secondly, as noted by Appleman, feminist critic can be used as a lens for understanding the sociocultural context of text (Appleman, 2015). As a lens the feminist critic can have two purposes when applied to the understanding of texts written by men and texts written by women (Appleman, 2015). From the work of Showalter it can be deduced that the feminist lens can be used to understand and analyse the woman as a reader, that is, the consumer of the end product of literary text written by men (Showalter, 1985 in Appleman, 2015). In this regard, the woman as a reader or feminist critique is seen as the way in which a female reader can actually change our uneasiness of a given text, awakening it to the significance of its

sexual codes (Showalter, 1985). In other words, feminist critique does highlight images or stereotypes of women in literature which eventually may alter some of these stereotypes. So this type of feminist critique is concerned with highlighting the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience in popular culture and film as illustrated above. According to Morris, feminists aim at undermining and replacing the present rigid division of gender identity therefore have as their ultimate goal a new way of knowing ourselves and our world, a new ethical order of meanings and values (Morris, 1993, p.6). The second type of feminine criticism is concerned with woman as the author (Showalter, 1985 in Appleman, 2015).

In literature, feminism can be seen as an approach to understanding literary works in both production and reception. In the 1960s, there was a movement for women fighting for equal rights as a social class, this can be seen as the beginning of Feminism. The history of Feminism in literary work can be traced back to the work of Virginia Woolf who wrote an essay in 1929 titled 'A room of one's own'. Woolf's work argued that there was need for a woman to have economic and social freedom in order to write fiction as evidenced in her words 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'.

Thirdly, literary texts can be considered as a powerful avenue or tool for understanding how society works to the disadvantage of women as well as help to bring justice to the disadvantaged group of these individuals. Morris notes that, literature in many cultures takes a considerably prestigious position as it expresses the highest ideals and aspirations of human kind, the noblest examples of human thought and action to imitate and aim to (Morris, 1993). This implies that feminist literary criticism has the power to change perceptions of readers in terms of how they view the gender of the author and in turn how they perceive male or female authored texts. Noted by Barrett and Callinan (1992) numerous authors from earlier times have newly been taken seriously as as feminists have become interested in hearing women's voices in literature. As earlier noted literary canon was considered a very male domain. What feminists attempt to do is to redress the *disparity* that has traditionally persisted in favor of men's writing. They do so by examining various ways by which women's concerns and women's writing has been marginalized. Morris, notes that literary canon can be seen as having the ability to offer special insight into human experiences and sharpen our perception of reality (Morris, 1993).

Fourthly, feminism increased a focus on women's literary work. According to Morris, Showalter's individual critic has been responsible for encouraging the focus on women's writing, this is also seen as the second phase of feminist critique (Morris, 1993). The second phase of feminism is associated with another notable contributor to feminist literary theory Elaine Showalter who is considered as the leader of the second wave of feminism. Her major contribution is made through the concept of gynocriticism. Showalter's concept of gynocritics is said to start at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of

male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture...” (quoted in Karmarkar, 2014; p.35). The notion of gynocriticism centres on three areas which exemplifies feminism, these are (a) the peculiarity of women’s writing, (b) the significance of regenerating a practice of women writers and (c) evaluating women’s ethos in its own right. According to Seldon and colleagues, gynocriticism “centres on the female author and character, and on female experience as the marker of legitimacy and on notions of ‘reality’ which can be signified, and practically related to, by way of the literary work” (Selden et. al., 1985;pp. 136-7). In this regard, notions of ‘reality’ are to do with a collective understanding of what it means to be a woman (Selden et al., 1985).

As noted by Morris, feminists challenge perceptions of women’s writings as simply reflecting women’s experiences (Morris, 1993). However, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women’s writing must be seen as constructing techniques of evasion and concealment (Gilbert and Gubar, in Morris, 1993). In addition, Morris notes that what female authors do is to create a monstrous woman who accepts and rejects the structures of patriarchal society (Morris, 1993). This attitude in women’s work is referred to as the mad woman. This madness is however said to be concealed in artistic deceptively quiet surface (Morris, 1993). The protest of female authors may not always be visible.

According to Kolodny, classical literary theory largely demanded a formalist perspective grounded on the belief of a common, model or implicit reader, impeding any reflection of gender as a conditioning variable in the reading process (Kolodny, 1980). As a way of protesting against these formalist perspectives and largely, against the traditionally male canon, some feminist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s launched an aggressive campaign that emphasised the female reader. For example the terminology of the *resisting reader* was coined by Fetterley as a prescriptive reading strategy for women who read male literature which she claimed forces them to identify with a male’s point of view and thus think and feel like men Fetterley (1978). As Fetterley saw the empathy with a male’s point of view as being psychologically disadvantageous to women’s identity, she devised this resistant reader strategy which helped the women readers not to empathise with the male characters in the text.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the essay has uncovered discussions of how knowledge of the author’s gender affects readers. While gender is assigned biologically, there are gender role attributes assigned to either male or female socially and culturally. The social construction of gender roles also impacts on literary work. Texts written by women tend to be treated like women themselves who in many societies worldwide are marginalised. Men tend to maintain power

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through text and showing a negative image of women. Readers start sharing the values of the text through reading. This implies that negative views or images of women or men can actually impact on the reader- how the reader comes to understand and identify with the written text.

In trying to react to the negative images of women portrayed in literary work, feminist literary criticism imaged to highlight the negative perceptions of women. Feminism contributed to redressing the disparity between men and women in literary work by emphasising the importance of understanding gender inequalities and ways of dealing with these injustices embedded in the culturally constructed thinking of the differences between male and female.

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