



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

A Study of Psychology of Female Writing in Juliet Mitchell's “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis”

Ms. K. Gayathri Menon

Researcher, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University, Thrissur,
Kerala, India.

Abstract

Knowledge explosion is the key term that defines our present era where man is always on his way to unlock doors which exposes him into the treasure house of new knowledge, discoveries and developments. Moreover, globalization and information technology had hastened mankind's dive not only into the mines of the unexplored domains of our universe but also even to the nether world. All these triggers a paradigm shift and thus each second man's life on earth is entangled to various institutions as well as modes of knowledge. The whole world has been transformed to a web of inter connections and each one of us are actually trapped among almost all the strata of worldly existence. It is difficult for us to demarcate different disciplines of thought and here lies the significance of interdisciplinary knowledge. Psychoanalytic feminists explain women's subjugation in terms of its origin within the psychic structures of the society. For them the incessant reiteration of relational dynamics formed

during infancy defines this oppression. An investigation into the role of female writers in a patriarchal society with reference to the essay called “Femininity, narrative and Psychoanalysis” written by Juliet Mitchell is intended by this study.

Keywords

Psychoanalysis; Gender; Phallogocentrism; Hysteria; Juliet Mitchell.

The psychoanalytical feminists claim for a change in the experiences as well as linguistic patterns that produce and reinforce the binary of masculinity and femininity. Freudian and neo- Freudian notions that women are biologically, psychically, and morally inferior to men are opposed by these psychoanalytic feminists, who saw sexual difference and women’s otherness in relation to the psyche of the individual. While, the Freudian feminists are mainly Anglo- American who is more concerned with the production of male dominance in societies, the Lacanian feminists, mostly French analyze the link between gendered identities and language. According to the Lacanians, there is a need to change language for amending gender relations. They try to challenge women’s forced stance in a phallogocentric culture and argued that women needed to forego neutral, scientific and masculine language and embrace a rebellious creativity based on subjective experience of the body and feminine. Thus, through this they attempted to realize a female subject outside of patriarchal definitions of women. Thus it maintains that gender is not biological but is centered on the psycho-sexual development of the individual (Ramsey 162).

Juliet Mitchell is a psychoanalyst and a social feminist, who had tried to merge psychoanalysis and feminism. She saw Freud’s asymmetrical view of masculinity and femininity as something which reflects the realities of patriarchal culture. Just like other feminists Mitchell also wanted to topple

down the hierarchical order where women's position is inferior to that of man. Hélène Cixous in her essay *Sorties* declares;

The hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organisation to man. A male privilege can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity / passivity. (265)

According to Mitchell, children are socialized into appropriate gender roles and as a result women grow to be socialized into becoming the caretakers of their household. Elders usually expect and advise a girl child to walk, talk, dress and even sleep in such a way that the stamp of femininity is reared and asserted in her psyche. Thus her future gender roles in a society are moulded from childhood onwards, compelling her to go with the conventional currents of the society. If one inquire into the source of all these conventions and their beneficiaries, one will come up with an evident answer that it is the cankerous limbs of the patriarchal society that had trodden women under their feet for their own benefit. The girl escapes possible prosecution by interjecting societal and parental moral laws, thus repressing her identity's instinctual cravings and executing the super-ego's moral authority. People are very much aware of the truth that tribal groups are the actual inhabitants of the land. But still, the so called civilized human beings relegate them as uncivilized and uncultured masses. Thus the Othering happens everywhere and in it is much more visible in gender.

Even though the essay addresses more than a single topic all its topics are linked together, where she places each topic as a constraint around the identity of women in society. In terms of language women is constrained because language is masculine, while in a capitalist society women is restricted by the bourgeois roles expected of her. And finally and perhaps most importantly from a psychoanalytic perspective women is chained by the

resulting masculine society derived from pre-oedipal childhood. The combination of these constraints exerts pressure on her and the result is a feminist movement that simultaneously rejects masculine society, while adhering to its rules. Through this essay Juliet Mitchell offers her views on the history of the development of novel as well as the role of women writers within the literary world.

Juliet Mitchell begins her essay by stating that psychoanalysis is a 'talking cure'. What happens in psychoanalysis is a kind of story telling where the patient recounts certain incidents affecting his or her psyche. The psychoanalyst is then able to offer a solution to the incident and for that both of them need language to express. Thus psychoanalysis like writing novels is a process of telling and retelling stories. She here says; "The analyst listens; through an association something intrudes, disrupts, offers the anarchist carnival back into that history, the story won't quite do and so the process starts again" (388). The carnival referred to here is the Bakhtinian notion of deception. Bakhtin states that in every level of society, deception is at play where there are multiple levels of power and resistance at work. These forces of deception are what allow people in a society to put on masks and play certain roles. Thus because of this deceptive nature of communication, any form of action in society is never constant. Mitchell says, "What can you do but disrupt a history, and re-create it as another" (388).

As a result of the multiple retellings, there happen an alteration of events and through this deception, the history of the patient is not only replaced by another but also that there is no single correct form of history. This complex issue gets more complex if it is read within the background of women's existence. Mitchell is concerned about the effect that a male-oriented language have on female subject during this disruption of history. What happens to a women speaking about her issues, in a phallogentric setting? A woman attempting to understand her own history is thwarted by the loss of true

communication in the feminine sense. She is actually twice made dumb and excluded from the realm of expressing subjective experience. Thus for a woman it becomes a momentous task to express herself freely in a society that has been shaped according to the norms of men. Hélène Cixous deals with the same problem. She says:

Whenever a family model is brought into play; in fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question 'what is it?'; as soon as there is a will to say something. A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back – to your father. You can even notice that there's no place at all for women in the operation. (265)

This is the same for a woman attempting to create her own history when the involvement of women during the early period of the novel is analysed. Here too women were attempting to carve a niche into an ultimately male dominated territory. This was quite successfully done with the advent of the novel during the 17th Century. It was radical that women were beginning to express themselves, but it was through the medium of writing. Here something akin to psychoanalytic practice is at work, where the subject is consciously able to re-create a history of what they were feeling themselves in the process of becoming women that too in a new bourgeois society. Her words go on like this, "...why women have to write the novel, the story of their own domesticity, the story of their own seclusion" (389). In doing so woman is classifying herself within a given domain, but she is doing so based on the constraints imposed on her by the patriarchal domain.

When contemporary feminist critics re-read, resurrect and analyse the writings of these women novelists of the 17th Century, they identify the fact that all their writings are conformist to the male tradition. Mitchell quotes the words of the famous critic Julia Kristeva on this tradition as "the discourse of the hysteric" (389). According to Juliet Mitchell there is nothing wrong with this

kind of conformist tradition, since we came to know of women, her feelings, emotions, position, story and seclusion from these works. The only two ways left for a woman to find a vent for her inner realm is either to write using masculine language or to write as “the hysteric” which is the combination of both. For her, there is no women’s voice, but the hysteric voice which is the women’s masculine language. She has to speak masculinely in such a phallogentric, where Mitchell says “hysteria is the woman’s simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism...It touches, therefore on the importance of bisexuality” (389).

Mitchell illustrates an effective alternative symbolic universe by using the example of Emilie Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. The novel is clearly a critique of the symbolic but is far more effective because it works within a male oriented language. Bronte published *Wuthering Heights* under male pseudonym, which gave her work a better platform to criticize the male dominated society. She criticize the clichéd romantic gentleman Lockwood as, “He is set up as a foppish gentleman from the town who thinks he loves all the things the romantic gentleman is supposed to love, such as solitude, or a heart of gold beneath a fierce exterior” (391)

Wuthering Heights is a story filled with intense emotions, where myriad interpretations are possible. For Mitchell, the story of Catherine bears a hysteric tenor to it, since even though Catherine loves Heathcliff, she is not able to immerse herself fully into the pleasure of that relationship due to the restrictions imposed by the patriarchy. Mr. Earnshaw introduced Heathcliff to her as a brother which makes him severed from her as a lover. The gender roles drawn by the society force her to marry Edgar Linton. But the hysteric tradition to which Bronte belongs, makes her question the patriarchal system through the denial of that relationship between Catherine and Edgar Linton by killing Catherine. Catherine symbolically broke the incest taboo by saying “I am Heathcliff, he’s more myself than I am” (92). So the choice for women within

the novel is either to survive by becoming the hysteric's ambiguous choice into femininity by marrying Edger Linton or to go for oneness and unity with Healthchiff through death. By having a women claiming desire to be a man, the author is trying to offer an image of hysteria that challenges the norms of identity.

Works Cited

Bronte, Emilie. *Wuthering Heights*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Print.

Cixous, Hélène. "Sorties". *A Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. New Delhi: Pearson, 2003. Print. 263-270.

Mitchell, Juliet. "Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis." *A Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. New Delhi: Pearson, 2003. Print. 388-392.

Ramsey, D. "Feminism and Psychoanalysis". *Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*. Ed. Gamble S. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print. 168-179.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Menon, Gayathri K. "A Study of Psychology of Female Writing in Juliet Mitchell's "Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis"." *Literary Quest* 1.9 (2015): 172-178. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.