

English Through a Feminist's Perspective: A History and Modern Aspects

Arishmita Mukherjee

Institute of Engineering & Management, Kolkata, India

Abstract

Feminism, defined as the movement to emancipate and uplift women to promote complete equality among the two genders, has had to focus a lot on English Language since the Victorian Era, to gratify its' basic purpose of women empowerment. While using English as a medium to propagate the cause, to achieve the right to Language had been a fight. This paper shall focus on a detailed study of English with the viewpoint of a feminist, a history of how feminism and women empowerment has been associated with the language, and how in modern days, feminists still have a lot to complain about. A detailed focus shall also be imparted to Gender Neutrality in English, and the subtle sexism that prevails in the most trusted dictionaries, thus rooting the agenda of patriarchy in each generation. Through an explanation of The Madwoman Thesis and Gynocriticism, feminism's struggle as a female reader and author shall be explained in detail, including how to hold the pen, in itself, was a war that needed to be fought. In the recent scandalized view of what "feminism" or "feminist" means and what it actually stands for, the development that has been through language shall be talked about. Workplace language, societal language, and the behind the scenes incidents with authors and females in general shall also be highlighted.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Neutrality, Madwoman Theory, Pen, Victorian Era.

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The History of Feminism and English

The Struggle for The Pen

During the second wave of feminism, dating back to the 1960s, female representation in English was heavily scrutinized and criticized. It was seen that women were deprived of articulation rights, as that could help her create an identity as a writer, and thus add onto her defiance to follow societal norms. The “pen” was considered to be a right of the male, almost equivalent to “penis”, and thus females were denied any access to literature. While male writers suffered from identity disparity with a foreboding comparison to their ancestors, female writers did not have a proper identity in themselves. Second wave of feminism encouraged female writers to add representation and actuate their writing style that focused on the characters, mainly female.

The Three Phases of Feminine Language

Elaine Showalter, in her book “A Literature of Their Own”, projects the idea of Gynocriticism, in which female literature is divided into three phases:

- A. The Feminine Phase (1840-1880): Where female authors did not go against internalized patriarchy and continued to infuse them within their writings. Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, and the later generation of Charlotte Yonge, Dinah Mulock Craik, Margaret Oliphant, and

- B. Elizabeth Lynn Linton were some of the many writers of this phase. They wrote under male pseudonyms, and had an internalized dispute between “resistance” and “obedience” and found themselves “metaphorically paralyzed”, trying to confine their writing styles to Victorian bourgeois propriety rather than their own struggles as women. Perhaps that is why the Victorian Literary Market saw a fair share of literature by these women but not a revolution.
- C. The Feminist Phase (1880-1920): Where female writing changed drastically to document their oppression and struggle, aggressively demanding equality and male privileges. It was a revolution for female journalism too, as Virginia Woolf and many like her arose. The significant part of this movement was being radically protestant in nature, with self-imposed oppression being the key highlight. Eleanor describes this phase as that of a “message” oriented spree rather than actual, fine, literature that is creation based. Mary Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, and Florence Marryat, were some of the writers of this era.
- D. The Female Phase (1920-): This phase marks the beginning of the exploration of the female persona, devoid of social stigmas and characteristic fallacies. However, the early phase has been criticized by Eleanor to be “androgynistic” in its’ content, which changed after the 1960s when second wave of feminism hit through. Writers such as Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt, and Beryl Bainbridge could access women's experiences, using previously taboo language and situations, and defining how anger and sexuality could be accepted as sources of female creativity.

The Character Dichotomy of Females

Due to the Victorian era standards that were imposed on women, male writing of female characters seemed to include only the Angel and the Monster side, with no in between. The Angel would refer to someone who is meek, pious, dutiful, and submissive, thus a heroine to her surrounding males and the ideal to other females, while the Monster side would refer to someone who is aggressive, passionate, sensual, basically all the characteristics that would cause any Victorian male considerable anxiety. With these two characters in articulation, a well-balanced and normal female character was a hard catch.



The Madwoman Thesis

During 1979, Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert published “The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination”, a gem of second-wave feminist criticism. Offering a perspective like never before, they analyzed the Angel/Monster trope of 19th century “Feminine” Phase writers and how they let patriarchy dictate their creativity into a specific Dichotomy. Their oppression, and frustration at being so trampled upon, influenced their creative output in a way that the true exploration of feminine literature seemed to have gone unnoticed. Since females were not heavily entertained in writing, their creative geniuses would come out in a more flamboyant and self-destructive mannerism than what is healthy. The book is derived from Jane Eyre’s character, Bertha Mason, who is locked away by her husband Mr. Rochester in the attic of Thornfield Hall. She is an ominous character, full of uncontrollable passion, sensuality, and madness, almost bestial as well. This

character seemed to be the foil for Jane's nature, but the thesis suggested that in reality, it was a synchronous, interdependent existence rather than a totally separate phenomenon. Jane Eyre had herself entertained a part of Bertha by being a rebel against the misogynistic society that she was born into. So there didn't exist a thin line, but a mixture of these two characters. This Thesis thus helped a lot of previous female works gain recognition while simultaneously laying the foundation for future creation. It can be safe to say that the Angel/Monster syndrome still exists today, albeit in the form of the Madonna-Whore complex.



The Yellow Wallpaper

The Yellow Wallpaper is an 1892 short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which centers around a woman who develops hysterical tendencies and is brought to “rest-care” by her husband with his sister acting as housekeeper. Her husband, John, a physician in himself, treats her hysteria as a case of “temporary nervous depression”, a diagnosis common to women during that period, that reflects the common narrative of how women were looked down upon as inherently hysterical creatures. She was forbidden from writing, her true passion, or even socializing, and the treatment took a severe toll on her when she started tearing down the yellow wallpaper in her room to apparently “free the woman there”. Aside from the apparent inconsistencies that is shown in the main character due to her mental stability during that time, the story is Charlotte's personal story as well, when she developed destructive and inconsistencies because of the way her creative self was stomped upon. She was given “rest-care” diagnosis by imposing upon her “a more domestic environment”, thus prohibiting her from socializing and writing. A great

example of how women were truly treated in those times for writing, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a great support to *The Madwoman Thesis*.

The fight for the pen has always been one of the major ones that needed to be fought by women. The empowerment that articulation and documentation bestowed upon them was a great boost to the feminist agenda, as has been seen throughout. Right to Language and Literature, through a tough fight, had finally been won, and majorly due to the feminist wave of the 1960s.

Modern Day Scenario

How has Language been used for Women?

English Language has not been kind to women with its beautiful terms. What does a woman, who majorly finds male friends comfortable, get termed as by society? A slut. A whore. A prude. A prostitute. A tramp. A skank. Cheap. The list projects itself to be unending. But what does a man receive should they have an active heterosexual sex life? A player. A womanizer. A dude. A Casanova. None of which are remotely close to the psychological effect that “whore” or “slut” entails. Does it seem, for a moment, that Language has entertained more insults to women than it has for men? Not to mention, “playboy” and “Romeo” acts more as a sense of wondrous achievement for many men, and sadly a very attractive point for some females. Through ages, women have been subjected to such terms to crush their spirit, to seal their opinionated mouths. Pimps and human traffickers brainwash kidnapped girls using these very words to end her hopes and dreams before proceeding to use her for their own financial purposes. They are made to realize that their worth is determined by the activeness of their sex life. However, the same

treatment is not extended to men in the same measure. More so, women opt to crush their own kind using these words. This may arise due to jealousy, or the need to oppress other women into society's subservience. Based on studies, women have been found to have low self-esteem, and the habit of self-blame after being branded with such terms. It might not be a stretch to conclude that these derogatory profanities of the language have been harder on women than on men.

To cite a few cases:

1. Kaitlyn Bristowe: Kaitlyn Bristowe, Bachelorette in 2015, received a vicious barrage of hate messages and death threats almost all from women for choosing to have consensual sex with contestant Nick Viall prior to the Fantasy Suite date and her final selection. Nick Viall was not treated the same way.
2. Monica Lewinsky: Monica Lewinsky was slut-shamed and bullied to an extent she considered suicide, for having a sexual relationship with Bill Clinton. However, Bill Clinton was able to get on with life as usual, and continued to be well respected by both men and women. Even though Bill faced sexual harassment charges from yet another woman, Former Arkansas state employee Paula Jones, he did not receive as big of a hate as Monica Lewinsky.
3. Priyanka Chopra: Priyanka Chopra continues to get bullied online, with all these words, and mostly from women, because she married Nick Jonas with a wide age gap. However, it is astonishing how the same cyberbullies will enjoy when a Bollywood actor “romances” an actress the age of his niece or daughter! Surprisingly, also the industry Priyanka is from! Nick Jonas did not just escape the mass hatred, but is quite in the news for his latest release, “Sucker”, and is still largely fetishized by women.

If we shift our focus from a deeper arena to a lighter workplace situation, women have complained of being undermined with the usage of “girl”. Girl, as in someone who's younger and obviously comparatively immature than a “lady”, has been quite the weapon for chauvinists at the office.

“Leave the technical details to us, girl.”

“Let me lift that, you're a girl.”

Probably, a shift of focus from stereotypes would do the humor of male coworkers some good, and bestow upon women the workplace comfort everyone deserves.

Gender Neutrality of Language

English Language has always strived towards a proclaimed neutrality in accordance to gender related terms, not only with respect to women, but transgenders, etc. But the question how much of neutrality has this language actually achieved to make a woman feel empowered enough? It turns out that gender neutrality cannot really be considered a chef-d'œuvre of English, at least, not yet. For example, should we consider the words like “actress” or “poetess”, the norm dictates that these words are redundant. Instead, “actor” and “poet”, has been made the norm. It is thus, an obvious question, why is the male term always normalized? How much of “neutrality” does this “normalization” entail? Or is it just the usual “males are the better sex” justification under the guise of inclusivity? Since these words have been out-normed by its' male counterparts, it is not very out worldly to declare the failure in the diversity of this language.

While writing a letter, children of very young age and vulnerable minds, are taught to write “Dear Sir” should they not know the gender of the person they're addressing their letter to. That, indeed is an ungratifying approach towards language on the basis of gender. Why was “Dear Madam” not normalized?

The argument of preached gender-neutrality loses its' credibility when we use the same address in a different sentence, that essentially includes a gender role.

“Sir, did your water break?”

“The actor had periods all of a sudden!”

“The poet is breastfeeding the baby.”

The sheer fact that these sentences, used in an innocent sense of gender neutrality, would cause any hearer to squirm a bit in discomfort shows how Language has failed to do its' part for feminism. Making the female term the norm has been a very rare, if not a totally absent, action. Since, during the previous eras, women were generally not allowed to work, the connotations are in a way, understandable. The words itself remind the way women have obtained their fundamental rights. A suffix to the root male word to obtain a new female word, as if to warrant for an unwelcome change. Should a child be asked to draw a doctor and a nurse, their first approach shall be to draw a male as a doctor, and a female as a nurse. The innate stereotype is thus rooted far; no matter how much English has talked of gender neutrality. In countries where English is treated as a second language, this is a rampant phenomenon and further embeds the concept of patriarchy, unbeknownst to everyone. “Lady doctor”, “Lady teacher”, “Lady Editor” still does its' rounds, even in official setups. The implications are sorrowful, even though these

terms are supposed to be open for all genders. The solution to this unnoticed but ravaging problem that instigates subtle male normalization is to change the situation at the grass root level, making gender neutral pronouns or nouns achieve the true meaning of the term, and not just some stereotypical point of view aided by years of male dominance and patriarchy. Feminism shall receive an upper hand in its' ultimate aim of women empowerment, should Language be practiced in a way truly including everyone.

The Rampant Sexism in Oxford Dictionary

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The OED that we have trusted since time immemorial, that we have taught our children, that we have suggested to any new English learner, has its' fair share of subtle ideological fallacies. Lexicography, that is, the art of making dictionaries, has always been a very androcentric department. Not just in the form of mostly males composing dictionaries, but also in the form of rabid patriarchy and stereotype throughout. The Oxford Dictionary happens to be no exception.

A. The Case of "Lesbians":

Should we consider its' claims in itself, the Dictionary has been recording words since the 18th century? It thus contains a lot of words that are now arcane and obsolete, and in some cases, even offensive. For example, 'scrolloping' that appears in the works of The Virginia Woolf, and 'phlogiston', the 18th century name of a chemical that never existed in the first place. However, the question is, how did 'lesbian' go excluded for so many decades? Did the Oxford Dictionary treat it as something too 'crass' and too 'vile' to be included? The deliberate decision to continue to exclude it from the Dictionary during the editing of the first Supplement in 1933, even though

the term had been in use since the late 19th century, therefore, warranting its' entry in the Dictionary, is unfathomable. This is also quite ironically surprising, given that the 1933 Supplement did include, for the first time, the term "homosexual" (adj.), defined as 'pertaining to or characterized by sexual propensity for one's own sex'. Along with lesbianism, lesbian (noun and adjective) was finally added to OED in R.W. Burchfield's second Supplement in 1976 (Vol 2), with quotations dating from 1890 (1870 for lesbianism). The illustration, however, included this, from the writer Cecil Day Lewis:

"I shall never write real poetry. Women never do, unless they're invalids, or Lesbians, or something."

B. The General Illustrations:

The Oxford and Cambridge Dictionary entertains questionable stereotypical illustrations that further enunciates the rabid form of male supremacy.

1. Rabid(Oxford): Defined as "Having or proceeding from an extreme or fanatical support of or belief in something." The illustration phrase? "A rabid feminist".
2. ShriII(Cambridge): Illustrated as "the rising shrill of women's voices", pertaining to the rather unscientific hyperbole of women having higher pitch of voice than men.
3. Grating (other): Defined as "sounding harsh and unpleasant", it was illustrated with the phrase "her high, grating voice", the typical excuse men conjure up to shut a woman with a valid opinion on remotely anything.

4. Psyche (other): The example sentence is, “I will never really fathom the female psyche”, a tiring repetition of the same narrative society uses to comprehend a woman with a personality.
5. Nagging(Cambridge): The example phrase is “a nagging wife”, that would typically remind any woman of what their predicament used to be in the earlier times, being a wife and burying your individual thoughts and opinions under that of your husband.
6. Mop (Oxford): The verb form is defined correctly, but the illustrations are as follows:
 - ‘she mopped the floor and cleaned out two cupboards’
 - ‘a barmaid rushed forward to mop up the spilt beer’
 - ‘he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to mop his brow’.

Even in dictionaries other than Oxford, to maintain an apparent “gender-equality”, alternate example sentences are used to define a word, entailing the male and female subject in each, but rather laughably so. It only accentuates the stereotypes more instead of focusing on burning them out. In Oxford, Words like “research” entails how “he” uses research to back up his findings, while “housework” has a plethora of example sentences that only tend to female housework, and the little effort they have put in trying to make it seem non-sexist, has gone to waste with sentences like this: ‘As the only boy, I definitely got away with doing very little housework.’ In other dictionaries, with “nurse”, they say how women ‘nurse’ (verb), and men ‘get nursed’. Another classic, illustrating the verb ‘mop’, had ‘he took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow’ along with ‘the charwoman had just mopped the linoleum that covered the stairs’.

It seems like Mary Daly’s suggested synonym of “dictionary” is not a very farfetched idea in itself.

During 2016, Canadian anthropologist Michael Oman-Reagan who was busy doing a PhD at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, attacked Oxford on Twitter citing these examples. Oxford's verified account replied to his feminist agenda as “If only there was a word to describe how strongly you felt about feminism”, hinting at an unnecessary but poignant jab that is least expected from an organization like theirs. When they faced backlash, they said that they did not intend “rabid” to come across as a negative light, however failing to come up with a proper justification for the other accusations. Since then they have worked on “rabid” and made the necessary edits.

While it has been seen that the part of the brain associated with hearing, language, etc., has statistically shown more response to language in females than in males, with the latter guided more through audio-visual perspectives, female representation in language can still be improved. With a study of the New York Times Best Seller List, it can be seen that the ratio of representation has been subject to a lot of fluctuations. Female writers often complain about not being contacted by editors for manuscripts when under their real name, but being contacted rather frequently when they used a male name. On an average, the usual frequency of female character-centric works winning awards is comparatively low, along with works of female authors themselves. Representation has to be improved with focus on the basic level of how the language is being taught to the future generation, and keeping prospects of it open to everyone, regardless of gender, by correcting the dictionaries, and so on. Then only shall feminism truly be helped by English.

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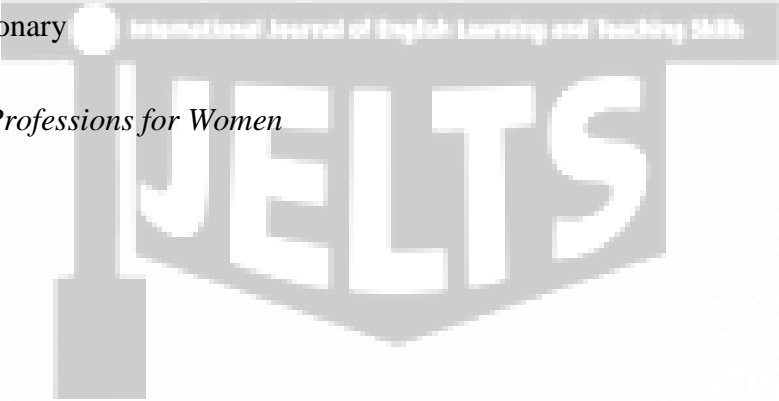
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