Feminist Debates and Readings of Villette, Wide Saragossa Sea and Wise Children

Özet

Abstract
From the beginning, our ways of writing and thinking about women’s literature have been greatly influenced and shaped by Anglo-American Feminist Criticism from which we have learned much. All research on women’s literature must make reference in one way or another to Feminist Criticism. Likewise, this presentation will analyse three novels written by three British women novelists in the light of the developments in Feminist Criticism since the 60s.

Our ways of thinking and writing about women’s literature have both been challenged and shaped by feminist criticism of the past century, feminist critics have taught us much about women and writing, its from them that we have learned the social construction of gender; ways of understanding patriarchy, but most importantly the conditions under which the female writer created her art.

The explosive period of development in feminist criticism is in the first half of the 20thc., 60s are important because in the 60s through the works of Anglo-American feminist critics, the feminist political action was extended to the cultural domain for the first time.

Kate Millett’s doctoral thesis Sexual Politics (1969) is an epoch making work in this sense, that it carries the political action to the cultural domain. Millett examined the workings of “sexual politics” in the history and literatures of the 19th and 20th centuries in western societies and came to the conclusion that male dominance over female constituted “perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture, provides its most … fundamental concept of power”. To Millett “sexual politics” is the process by which males seek to maintain dominion over females, and that literature has to be understood in relation to its socio-cultural context. Thus, the re-contextualising of literature formed an important strategy for the 60s and 70s feminist critics. Millett’s views encouraged the “images of women” criticism in Anglo-American universities which involved the study of false images of women in fiction by both sexes, but mostly stereotypes of women in male writing. From 1975 onwards interest focused on women writers with the influence of, Ellen Moers’ Literary Women (1976),Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of their Own (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwomen in the Attic (1979). These works saw women writers as part of a specifically female literary tradition. The study of a female tradition in literature was more than a methodological choice, it was an urgent political necessity, to undo the patriarchal strategy of defining biological femaleness as “feminine” regardless of individual differences, and to avoid patriarchal notions of aesthetics, history and tradition.

Moers is the first to attempt at describing the history of women’s writing as a “rapid and powerful undercurrent”, however her book is too unaware of any kind of literary theory, to function as criticism. Elaine Showalter stressed the transience of female fame and its impact on generations of writers and how each generation found itself without a history and was forced to rediscover the past over and over again (73-99). Gilbert and Gubar provide us with a new theory of women’s literary creativity; they
claim that patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a male quality, the writer “fathers” his text, in the image of the Divine Creator, he becomes the “author”. The female artist’s self-definition is complicated by patriarchal definitions of herself as a result of which the woman writer suffers from an anxiety of authorship. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979:73-78)

On the whole these early critics saw all women’s texts as feminist texts embodying “female rage” against patriarchal oppression, and pictured the female writer as integrated and whole. They interpreted the contradictions and divisions of women characters as illustrating “patriarchal distortion” and studied how the female author simultaneously conforms to and subverts the order and literary standards of patriarchy.

Different texts lend themselves more or less readily to different readings. Charlotte Bronte’s *Villette* (1853) is more open to readings under the light of issues raised by 60 and 70s feminist criticism.

Lucy Snowe, the protagonist of Bronte’s novel, is an enigmatic character who tells her story as if all the time the stories of other women more beautiful than herself were the centre of her tale, a character of profound alienation, she remains enigmatic because nobody really wants to know her or listen to her. She is an “inoffensive shadow”, she is the “invisible woman” with nothing that can make her “visible” to the 19th century society.

She lacks beauty, respectable social connections, family, a proper income and above all she is a governess which meant to be a dependent with a low status and poverty wages almost a servant. To Kate Millett she is a woman with a “superb mind imperfectly developed and a soul so omnivorously large it casts every other character into the shadows” (Nester 1992:37)

Being invisible, she watches people. She studies Ginevra Fanshove foreexample, the dumb but cruel beauty of the novel. Lucy may hate Ginevra, but wishes to have been as beautiful as her. She watches Mme. Beck, the owner of the Pensionnat, she sees her hypocrisy and her relentless surveillance of other peoples private lives, and she watches Paulina Mary, the perfect woman of the Victorian society and is appalled that society’s perfect woman is a mental infant . Lucy may wish for the beauty of one or the money of the other but she does not want to be like any of them. Lucy also watches men, to Kate Millett “she envies every man his occupation, John his medicine, Paul his scholarship, just as she
envied them their education” (Ibid:37). She is struck by John Graham Breton’s goodlooks and kindness, but she knows that he will never acknowledge any woman who is not beautiful or rich. She watches Paul Emanuel, who is the voice of male supremacy, for whom a woman of intellect is a “luckless accident”, she sees how terrified he is of female competion; yet Paul is the only man who sees Lucy and according to Kate Millett the moment he sees her he hates her, nevertheless he falls in love with her because seeing is a point of contact.

Lucy cannot be contained by the roles available to her, neither is she free of them. The disparity between what is publicly expected of her and her private sense of herself becomes the source of her feelings of unreality and finally her depression.

There is probably nothing so subversive in the book as the scene in the Brussels museum where she studies the two paintings which reflect the two faces of womanhood fashioned by the male, one for his pleasure the "Cleopatra” and the other for his instruction “the four stages of the virtous female : (200-202)

To Lucy the “Cleopatra” in the painting is absurd, meaningless and useless, but the representations of women in the four stages of woman hood are horrific:

They were painted rather in a remarkable style flat, dead, pale and formal. The first represented a “jeune Fille”, coming out of a church door........, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up the image of a most villainous little precious she hypocrite. The second, a “Mariée” with a long veil kneeling at a prie dieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together........ The third, a “Jeune Mere” hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby..... The fourth a “Veuve” being a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl..... All these four “Anges” were grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with ! insincere, ill humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities (202).

Lucy’s challenge to these models and her inner conflict that one of these should become her identity is implicit through the chapters.

Lucy heals through her depression and finds self knowledge and as she heals, the narrative defines her increasingly as the centre of her own
story. Paul flatters his vanity by lending her money, renting her a school of her own, ironically she is freed by a man. In the end Lucy is free but alone. Charlotte Bronte makes Lucy choose her hard won individualism by drowning M. Paul turned lover, in the end, to Kate Millett this is “because it is impossible for a Victorian novel to recommend a woman not to marry” (Ibid: 40). So Charlotte Bronte simultaneously conforms to and subverts patriarchy.

To the end of the 1970s Anglo American feminist critics have mostly been indifferent or even hostile towards literary theory which they regarded, as “abstract” ‘male’ activity. In the 1980 there was a breakthrough of theoretical reflections through the works of Annette Colodny, Elaine Showalter, Maria Jenlen and others. Toril Moi claims that the impact of feminist criticism is to be found not at the level of theory, but at the level of politics. Feminists have politicised existing critical methods and approaches and that is on the basis of its political theory that feminist criticism has become a new branch of literary studies in a position similar to that of other radical critics; like them they can afford to be pluralistic in their choice of literary methods and theories; and any approach that can be successfully appropriated to their political ends must be wellcome (Moi 1985:87).

Towards the end of the 1970s feminist debates were revolving around the question of an “écriture feminine” through the efforts of Helen Cixous and French feminism, which very quickly came to a theoretical and political dead end, for their arguments led to binarism and essentialism which proved dangerous for women.

Kristeva who flatly refuses to define woman, rejects any idea of an “écriture feminine”. Her theory of language as a heterogeneous signifying process located in and between speaking subjects suggests an alternative approach; the study of specific linguistic strategies in specific situations which will not allow for the generalisation of findings for all meaning is contextual and context is not a unitary phenomenon. (ed. Moi 1986:188-211). Kristeva strongly links to what today is called post-feminism, which came as a reaction against second wave feminism.

In the 1980 and 90s those who called themselves post-feminists believed that liberal feminists often fell into the role of speaking on behalf of third world women and that there is a balance between showing solidarity with oppressed groups and assuming a position which is profoundly matronizing.
To Gayatri Spivak “the community of women can only come after the recognition of differences between women.” (Brooks 1977:110) Halberg (Ibid:31) notes that women’s experiences are not unitary and that different groups of women, for example, black women, working class women; third world women and so forth, all have different “group-specific” knowledge.

Post feminism is the space where feminism intersects with post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. It shares with post-modernism, the rejection of master narratives and of essentialism. With post structuralism it shares the belief in an analysis of power within discourse. But post-feminists have felt closer to post-colonial theories, particularly in sharing strategies, for both have the same political ambitions.

According to post-feminists, women share the experience of oppression and repression with colonised races and cultures.

The notion of “double colonisation” the idea that women in formerly colonised societies were doubly colonised by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies was the catch phrase of the 1980 and 90s.

In Jean Rhys’s novel Wide Saragossa Sea (1966;1977) we have one of the best examples of “double colonisation” in the protagonist Antoinette. Antoinette’s fate as a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation in Jamaica, is determined by the politics of imperialism. As a descendent of slave owning white settlers, she is caught between the British imperialists who wish to exploit her and the natives who want to destroy her. Though raised as a white Christian, she is a true hybrid culturally, for she belongs to the land in which she was born and raised. Throughout the novel she is defined in terms of the land, its flowers, birds, mountains, waters.

Rochester, who marries her for her money, is the representative of both British imperialism and patriarchy. He hates her firstly, for everything that is not English in her and secondly, for not fitting into his ideas of womanhood. In his mind Jamaica and Antoinette are one and the same and are hated in a similar manner.

...... I hated its difference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty
He begins to destroy her even before they move to England, once in England she is locked up and forced to turn into the selfless, sacrificing wife, violently renamed Bertha, totally helpless and at his mercy. She also suffers because of displacement, for she cannot make sense of her new reality, she has no language to describe it with, for her reality and identity lie elsewhere as symbolised by her red-dress locked up in a cupboard which is the colour of “fire and sunset...and flamboyant flowers.” (115)

Jean Rhys does not represent Antoinnette turned Bertha as violent or animal-like as in Jane Eyre. The readers sympathies are totally on her side, her humanity is kept intact to reveal more powerfully her repression and oppression by patriarchy in the person of Rochester. Her silencing is the silencing of the oppressed and her only act, as her dream foretells, is the reaction of the oppressed. She will set Rochester’s mansion to fire the way the natives had burned down her father’s mansion back in Calubri. Thus Jean Rhys writes back to Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, to unveil, to subvert for post-colonial and feminist purposes by using the strategy of the canonical counter discourse emphasising the cultural construction of meaning.

Jean Rhys falls in with what Helen Tiffin has proposed as a strategy in her essay “Post Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse”. Tiffin proposes the use of sites of communication which are places of ideological innocence such as “magic realism”, “the carnivalesque”, “allegory” or “the subverting of a canonical text”, for the purpose of serving post-colonial and feminist needs.(ed. Ashcroft, at all. 1995:95-98)

Angela Carter too successfully makes use of the strategies proposed by Tiffin, and the strategy of rewriting becomes a significant tool in her hands with which to confront the problem of gender in different ways. Wise Children (1992) Carter’s last novel before her death is a writing back to a Shakespearean comic world of the carnivalesque through a British stage family of actors and actresses in which the men belong to the theatre and the women to the vaudville. The play that is the centre of the novel is A Midsummer Night’s Dream, it is acted out by the characters through out the novel and finally parodied as a 1930s Hollywood movie.

Kate Webb in her essay “Seriously Funny: Wise Children” offers a comprehensive analysis of Carter’s use of Shakespeare in the novel,
concentrating on how Carter humorously undermines Shakespeare’s cultural respectability by making Shakespeare work as a “two faced symbol”. On the one hand, claims Webb, Shakespeare functions as the symbol of British imperialism; Ranulph Hazard, the first great Shakespeare actor of the family of actors in the novel sees the performing of Shakespeare throughout the world as his mission in life, the taking of Englishness to foreigners; on the other hand, the carnivalesque world of the play, where all the actors are sexually ambivalent, allows Shakespeare to be seen as a subversive force, challenging notions of respectability and propriety. (Gamble 2001:168)

The central characters are Dora and Nora, identical twins, ex song and dance girls, the illegitimate daughters of a famous and rich Shakespeare actor Melchior Hazard, who refuses to own them and a vaudville actress, who died as soon as she gave birth to them. Brought up by Grandma Chance, who is not their real grandmother, they live in Brixton, London when the novel opens and now in their elder years, they are getting ready to celebrate their father’s centenary birthday.

The narrator, Dora, goes back in time to tell her and her sister’s story from the beginning. All characters are parts of Dora’s fiction, the novel is Dora’s autobiography. The lines parodying Wordsworth’s immortality Ode “if the child is father of the man….than who is the mother of the woman?” are clues to the theme of the novel.

According to Kate Webb and Gerardin Meaney, the novel focuses on the fictionality of paternity. Carter seeks to subvert patriarchal authority through the figure of Melchior Hazzard. “A mother is always a mother, since a mother is a biological fact, whilst a father is a moveable feast “(216) comments Nora as Melchior’s first wife confesses that he is not the father of their twin daughters Saskia and Imogen. On the question of fatherhood, Dora comments thus:

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\text{But again a person isn’t flesh of its father’s flesh, is it?. One little sperm out of millions swims up the cervix and it is so very, very easy to forget how it has happened. And Melchior, whose flesh we were, or, rather, whose emission sparked off our being, felt for us only occasional pity and now and then a vague affection that seemed to puzzle him as to the cause (174).}
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To Webb and Meaney, the question of origins and the theme of the fictionality of paternity are inseparable from the question of authorship.

Meaney has argued that Dora’s autobiography establishes the figure of the mother as the source of meaning, to her the language with which Dora speaks, the language of popular culture, reflects the appropriation of the aesthetics of the masculine “author”. However the carnivalesque conclusion of the novel, resists the complete overthrow of the symbolic order of the father. (Ibid:174)

Bakhtinian idea of carnival is central to Wise Children, carnival is essentially the celebration of transgression and breakdown of all barriers, linguistic and bodily ones; in the carnival world by putting on masks we transgress the order of the real world; women do not appear distinct from men and gender hierarchies are undermined. Because it denies female difference, carnival is subversive and carries the promise of politically transformative power.

In the novel the carnivalesque is provided by the world of the theatre which also is the world of fantasy, it is the behaviour of fathers, their “carnival selfishness” that creates opportunity for breakdown of order for transgression in this world. Peregrine, the twin brother of Melchior is a true carnivalesque character. “Here today and gone tomorrow not so much a man more of a travelling carnival” (169) he is called, however he is able to skip away from all his sexual transgressions including incestuous ones without punishment.

Dora celebrates carnivalesque life “What a joy it is to dance and sing” is her refrain, but when women become the objects of carnival’s disorder, the carnival is likely to defeat them. We can see this clearly when we look at the differences in the ultimate fates of Melchior Hazard and Grandma Chance. Grandma Chance is the one who attempts to write a different, female history, but becomes a comic relief in her old age and is suitably killed by a bomb during the World War. Melchior on the other hand, representative of patriarchal law, is knighted and honoured, with three wives and a number a legitimate and illegitimate children behind him, he survives to his one hundredth birthday on which occasion he looks “regal” and is presented with an enormous birthday cake in the shape of the Globe theatre. Other women that Grandma Chance are defeated in the end. Estella, Ronulph Hazard’s young wife cheats on her old husband and is destroyed by his jealousy. Lady Atalante Lynde, Melchior’s first wife, after being pushed downstairs by her twin daughters Saskia and Imogen, is crippled for life, adapted by Dora and
Nora, lives in their basement in her wheelchair and is rechristened “Wheelchair”.

Nora and Dora find life difficult in their old age, due to their carnivalesque recklessness:

*When I was young, says Dora,.….I’d wanted
The moment, to live in just the glorious moment,..
Pluck the day, Eat the peach. Tomorrow never comes. But, oh yes, tomorrow does came all right, and when it comes it lasts a bloody long time,.....*(125)

Dora knows that “The carnival’s got to stop some time” (222). What stops it in the novel is the World War which brings and balances the real against the fantasy world of the novel. Nevertheless the war is only mentioned by a few passing remarks. “I do not wish to talk about the war” says Dora “Suffice it to say it was no carnival” (222). On the whole Wise Children is a comic novel and to some critics the comedy is associated with femininity, to stress its powerlessness and tragedy represents the dominant cultural narrative; Meaney evaluates war in this context and claims that “patriarchy legitimates the violent disorders of war in order to sustain itself”. To Hanson, Wise Children emphasised the “implacability and the inescapability of patriarchal power” (ed. Gamble 2001:180)

As Carter herself has said: (interview 1993) Carnival:

*is here today and gone tomorrow,.....
Masters were master again the day after,
Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind.*(Ibid: 184)

Thus, Carnival is no reconstitution of order.

Prof. Dr. Oya Batum Menteşe
Atılım Üniversitesi
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü
ÖğretimÜyesi
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