

Analyzing The Works of Female Poets from Greek to Post-Modern Age

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Abstract

This paper explores the distinguished elements in the poetry of some eminent female poets from Greek era of Sappho to the modern poetry. The poetic developments of French feminism and Anglo-American feminism provide solid grounds to analyze the gender issues prevailing in the society in a specific period of time. Issues of the past and present have been highlighted and discussed with the modern expansions focusing the poetry produced by female poets and its place in the male chauvinist world. Existential and linguistic binary oppositions and to Lacanian and Freudian concepts of subjectivity, separation or loss established on absence have remained the main ideas behind the poetry produced by women from ancient to modern era. Works of major female poets have been discussed in this paper. This research is helpful to know about the characteristics, topics and ideology of the poetry produced by women poets under the patriarchal pressures.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Poetic developments, Feminist elements, Greek and Modern poetry.

Introduction

The feminist poetry has the quality to discuss different issues of society which is directly or indirectly associated with the woman class and its effects on over all society. This area has flourished in the modern world and feminist literary criticism is also thriving. Issues of variance, change and gender have been discussed in the works of female poets. Gradual change can be observed, in the era in which poetry is produced, the style and subjects have also absorbed the change in the works of different female poets from Greek to modern era. Greek poetry has its own distinct feminist elements. Anglo-American and French

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feminisms are collaborated on the basis of biological essentialism. The French try to discover unconsciousness while Anglo-Americans focus to explore consciousness. It cannot be distinguished with the awareness of the dissimilar meanings they provide “Woman” and “Feminine”. As Julia Kristeva claims that French feminists are interested to focus on women not “woman”. The cultural gap between the Anglo-American and French approaches is extensive. Some of the disagreements is stated by Mary Eagleton:

“The Anglo-Americans discuss power, the French pleasure; the Anglo-Americans are governed by humanism and empiricism while the French have developed an elaborate debate on textual theory. But Jardine ends with a hope for contact between the Anglo-American prescription for action and the French with the human subject’s inscription in culture through language.” (Kristeva, 1987)

Julia Kristeva and Elaine Showalter's philosophies presents variations. In the book *“A Literature of Their Own”*, Elaine Showalter shares the styles and traditions of women's writing with different variations from 1840 to the present. She has created three phases and divisions and calls the “Feminine, Feminist and Female”. In the Feminine stage, efforts were made by the women to write in the presence of intellectual male culture with different assumptions about female nature and works. This was the very initial stage from where female writers had tried to fight for their equal rights. This remained the most significant stage but in that phase feminist content remained displaced or ironic. Women discarded the accepting postures of femininity in the next phase of 1880-1920. This phase has also led the women writers towards betterment and strengthened them in the field of literature in writing these experiences. In the last Female phase, starts from 1920, women tried to be independent in gaining the art and acquired the techniques of feminist analysis in literature. All the three phases presents the real picture of the gradual freedom and emancipation in women’s literature. There is a difference between Gyno criticism and feminist critique presented by Elaine Showalter. In her presentation of this idea, feminist critique is male oriented, with stereo typing of women in the literature mostly produced by male. Gynocriticism focuses on women as a readers and also concentrates on women as the producers and creators of texts, theme, genres and different structures of literature. This shows that women were gaining the authority in writings in order to share their experiences.

It is said that the main roots of feminism were ended and buried in ancient Greek times, the revival has happened with the movement which is generally

known as three waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism is considered between 1830 to early 1900, in which women tried to fight for their equal rights but soon they realized that they should gain political power and the power to vote first. Later, these movements included the ingredients of economic, reproductive and sexual matters. This first wave of feminism can be taken as the first planted seed in this direction. The second wave of feminism started about 1960's to 1980's. During this phase, main focus has remained on reproductive and family rights, sexuality and workplace. Some other movements also started during this period of time including Gay and Lesbian Movement, Anti-Vietnam Movements, Black Civil Rights Movement, Chicano Rights Movement and Asian-American Civil Rights Movement. Critics and women supporters believe that due to all these movements, the voice of women for equal rights were not heard that time. The third wave of feminism started from 1990's and continues to this date. It is based on the "*Micro-Politics*" of gender equality. The term "Feminist" reunite this phase of feminism.

Research Questions

Q.1: What changes have occurred in themes of the poems produced by female poets from Greek period to Post-Modern era?

Q.2: How Feminist elements have become more visible and vibrant in modern poetry in comparison to Greek poetry produced by female poets?

Q.3: Why patriarchy has highly impacted in the poetry of female poets?

Analysis and Discussion

Sappho (630-570BC) has produced many volumes of poetry, which beautifully depicts of the ancient Greek world and the traditions of those times. Observing and accepting her giant literary talent, Plato had said that Sappho should be included in the list of muses. Most of her poems are love poems and contain several mythological references, in which she mostly praises the goddess of love, Aphrodite. In most of her paintings, it is visible that she has played humble music on lyre, it's a kind of small harp. With broken heart, she had committed suicide by leaping off a high cliff. In her famous poem "*I have not had one word from her*", she presents her feelings for Aphrodite while discussing her love matters.

"I said, "Go, and be happy
but remember (you know
well) whom you leave shackled by love

"If you forget me, think
of our gifts to Aphrodite
and all the loveliness that we shared."

Sappho's poem "*Hymn to Aphrodite*" leaves an impression on its reader that she can speak other than the side of a woman, the very poem reveals this fact:

“Ποικιλόθρον’ ἀθάνατ’ Ἀφροδίτα,
παῖ Δίος, δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε
μή μ’ ἄσαισι μήτ’ ὀνίαισι δάμνα
πότνια, θῦμον
ἀλλά τυίδ’ ἔλθ’, αἵποτα κατέρωτα
τᾶς ἔμας αὐδωσ αἴοισα πήλγι
ἔκλυες πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
χρῦσιον ἦλθες.
ἄρμ’ ὑποζεύξαια, κάλοι δέ σ’ ἄγον
ᾧκεες στρουῖθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας
πύκνα δινεῦντες πτέρ’ ἀπ’ ὠράνω
αἴθερος διὰ μέσσω.”

(Original Greek Text)

“Iridescent-throned Aphrodite, deathless
Child of Zeus, wile-weaver, I now implore you,
Don't--I beg you, Lady--with pains and torments
Crush down my spirit,
But before if ever you've heard my pleadings
Then return, as once when you left your father's
Golden house; you yoked to your shining car your
Wing-whirring sparrows;
Skimming down the paths of the sky's bright ether
On they brought you over the earth's black bosom,
Swiftly--then you stood with a sudden brilliance,
Goddess, before me;”

(Translated English Text)

Sappho's poetry survives in fragments and translators of modern times have the tough job of restructuring her poetry on the grounds of bits and pieces. She had both male and female lovers. Most of Sappho's poetry has a great reflation of feminist elements. Her poetry can be taken as one of the great pioneer' poetry, it has all the ingredients of feminism and a beautiful amalgamation of Greek poetic elements with special reference of Greek Gods and Goddesses like in her poems "*Come rosy-armed Graces, virgin daughters of Zeus*" and "*In my dream, I spoke to the Cyprian goddess*". She presents very passionate love to her lovers which is the the main feminist quality in her poetry:

"It is easy to believe that Greek women's subculture had its own traditional song. Women's lives were lived in large part separately from those of and there is ample evidence of a rich religious and cultural women's tradition from which men were excluded. Such a subculture would have had ample opportunity to develop its own poetry and songs. There is evidence women sang at the loom, during women's religious festivals, other communal activities in which men did not join. There evidence of folk songs sung by women in the archaic and including one that seems to have originated on Lesbos in Sappho's own time." (Skinner, 1982).

Most of the subjects and titles of Sappho's poem are based on love with both men and women, she was a lesbian and she has treated her female companions and friends so passionately in her poems as a conventional lover. These are the elements of ancient Greek times, but the elements of feminism are still there and can be seen in the poems of Sappho.

"Evidence from cultures other than Greek, though it requires Cautious treatment, suggests that it is a rare culture in which women do not sing. We need only recall that of and poems recorded in Yugoslavia by M. Parry and A. B. Lord in their research into the production of oral poetry, 11,000 were women's songs- in which the researchers had no interest." (Lord, 1948).

Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978) was an American 20th century poet, writer and publisher. She was very famous in magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *New Yorker*. Subjects of her poems distinguished from all her contemporary female poets. She has won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 for *Times*

Three (selected poems). Her specialty in her poems is humor, satiric tone and brilliant light verse poetry. She was neglected by second wave feminist literary critics, they tried to relate her with her contemporaries Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. Domesticity is very prominent in her poems, at the start of second-wave feminism while she avoids free verse among the rise of confessional and modernist avant-garde poetry. In her poem, “*The 5:32*” she expresses her love and affection for her husband while waiting, who is coming back from office in the evening:

“And a man coming toward me, smiling, the evening paper
Under his arm, and his hat pushed back on his head;
And wood smoke lying like haze on the quiet town,
And dinner waiting, and the sun not yet gone down.”

She tries to present the real role and duty of a lady and housewife, along with this Phyllis McGinley’s other poems “*Husbands Are Difficult*” and “*Daniel at Breakfast*” presents the feminist aspects of a woman of modern age in relation with her domestic life. She herself says about it:

“To be a housewife is a difficult, a wrenching, and sometimes
an ungrateful Job if it is looked on only as a job. Regarded as
a profession, it is the noblest as it is the most ancient of the
catalogue. Let none persuade us differently or the world is lost
indeed.” (McGinley, 1965).

Marge Piercy (1936-1982) has published 17 volumes of poetry. Her poetry is known for its very emotional timbre, highly personal, and often angry. Her poem “*The Moon is always Female*” is considered a classic text of the feminist movement. Most of her poems are the clear representation of feminist affairs and characteristics. Her poem “*Barbie Doll*” tells about different trends of our society. In this poem, she presents the continuous destruction of self-worth while comparing the normal to the unreal. Piercy uses similes, diction and ironic tone in her poetry. It attracts its reader how the main character is created even from the cradle in an artistic manner. She uses a compound noun for a character “*Girl child*”. There is a great feminist influence in this point which signifies the ways in which the child’s gender is to become her identity:

“This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons

and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.”

She tries to assign gender role from her infancy and she uses a word “presented” which makes the process more formal. A doll is given to her so that she can learn to handle the household and domestic affairs of life e.g. how to be a good housekeeper, to be a mother and lip-stick that helps her to teach even from the very beginning that her looks are also important. Piercy’s mostly poems have very clear feminist aspects which can also be seen in her other poems like “*My Mother's Body*”, “*What Are Big Girls Made Of?*” In her poem “*The Woman in the Ordinary*”, she presents the real picture of women in our society with full feminist elements and says:

“The woman in the ordinary pudgy downcast girl
is crouching with eyes and muscles clenched
Round and pebble smooth she effaces herself
under ripples of conversation and debate
The woman in the block of ivory soap
has massive thighs that neigh
great breasts that blare and strong arms that trumpet.”

Denise Levertov (1923-1997) has presented the real feminist feelings in her poems and has tried to express and relate her feelings with other women of her modern age. In her poem “*Stepping Westward*”, she presents herself in a condition of never ending provisionality, state of possibility and she says:

“If woman is inconstant
good, I am faithful to
ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now
is a time of ripening
If her part
is to be true
a north star
good, I hold steady
in the black sky
and vanish by day
yet burn there
in blue or above
quilts of cloud.”

It looks bit contradictory, it seems that her representation and identity is within an investigative basis. This enhances her poetic attributes when she looks indefinite, hesitant and embracing paradoxically and she tries to identify features to define and express herself. This is her poetic beauty which

represents her feminist approach. She sets aside essentialist notions of womanhood. Her poem advocates the right to describe herself in general and imprecise terms that nonetheless convey, in a certain sense, the uniqueness of her personality:

“There is no savor
more sweet, more salt
than to be glad to be
what, woman,
and who, myself,
I am, a shadow
that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out
On a thread of wonder.”

Maya Angelou (1928-2014) is renowned for her social and confessional poems with political touch carrying the feminist aspects. All the subjects of her poetry look so lively and attractive because it is her experience and soul which she has poured into her poems. Angelou had been a prostitute, an actress, a dancer, a cook, a waitress, a newspaper editor and a playwright. She became an author with her memoir “*I know why the caged Bird sings*” by the time she was 40. She describes the love and sufferings which are directly associated with women in the society; she also analyses the true position of women in the modern society. Use of language in her poems is very simple but attractive; her poems captivate the readers with their subjects and vitality. She discusses the never-ending cycle of chores in the daily life of a woman. Angelou’s poem “*Woman Work*” is the true representation of these feelings and she counts the domestic and household duties of daily routine life; she says in that poem that woman has got:

“The children to tend
the clothes to mend
the floor to mop
the food to shop
the chicken to fry
the company to feed
the garden to weed
the tots to dress
the cane to be cut
then to see about the sick
and the cotton to pick”.

According to her, the only task awarded to a woman is to look after the family members, feed and care her children and to perform her household duties.

Angelou's poem "*And Still, I Rise*" presents the real picture of the true position and status of women in society. In "*Phenomenal Women*", she highlights woman's power to rise and vitality which can be obtained by her through will power and achievements. Angelou says about men, "Swam around me like a hive of honey bees". Her poetry presents issues and themes based on feminist, romantic, social and political subjects. In most of her poems, subject and concepts of individual and personal identity has been presented in association of feminist issues, family, sex and communication. She once said before her death "I am a Woman/ Phenomenal Woman/ that's me, my mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive".

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) has discussed her inner painful split between "Animus" and Anima" in her poems. She has changed this theme over the years in various styles and process of her sexual and poetic awareness but she has tried to present a vision beyond the gender differences. In her recent poetry, she has tried to pierce the "frozen web" of binary oppositions which is based on the patriarchal thoughts and language. In her book "*What Is Found There*", she explains about her own poetic works:

"Our desire is taken from us before we have had a chance to name It for ourselves (what do we really want and fear?) or to dwell in our ambiguities and contradictions...As a poet, I choose to sieve up old shrunken words, heave them, dripping with silt, turn them over, and bring them into the air of the present... Poetry unsettles apparently self-evident propositions – not through ideology, but by its very presence and ways of being, its embodiment of states of longing and desire." (Rich, 1993)

This belief is based on her personal desires, those self-distancing approaches and 'asbestos gloves' gives her permission to handle the materials she is unable to touch and pick up bare-handed.

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers (1951), could not conceal glimpses of the split she even then experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationship with men." (Rich, 1972)

The poem "*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*" presents the opposition between the woman's imaginations in her tapestry work, her life style, it can be regarded as her Feminist and Female stages. She presents tigers on the canvas as the real tigers, it seems she tries to show bravery out of those canvas tigers to overcome on her worldly and domestic fears of life, she imagines Aunt's death and relates it with her proud and unafraid manners, she says in her poem "*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*":

"When Aunt is dead, her terrified hand will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

Adrienne Rich's poetry shows that her female identity is still masked and covered by male persona. It also looks that there is an internal fight between the "woman" and the "poet", only the death of one between them can provide the life to the other. Her poetry is a beautiful presentation of feminist aspect of modern era, she presents the real picture of the women of this age and society.

Julia Alvarez (b.1950) is a poet of modern era, most of her poems are about her childhood and her identities as a young girl, daughter, immigrant, the family issues and artistic voice of woman. Her book of poetry is divided into six sections, "Homecoming", "33", "Last Night at Tia's", "Heroines", "Redwing Sonnets" and "Housekeeping". The main section "Homecoming" has the basic elements and central images, in which she has presented the typical and routine household works like cooking, ironing, bed making, dusting, doing the laundry and cleaning have been presented as the key tasks in her poetry. She has portrayed tensions of a family dynamics, the daily chores of daughter and mother, and the physical awakening and emotions of a young girl to womanhood in her poems. She has discussed the complex relationship of mother and daughter, she presents it in purely feministic and artistic manner. These feelings can be observed in few lines of her poem "*Ironing Their Clothes*":

"To the family wardrobe drying on the clothesline
All needing a touch of my iron. Here I could tickle
The underarms of my big sister's petticoat
Or secretly pat the backside of her pajamas
For she too would have warned me not to muss
Her fresh blouses, starched jumpers, and smocks

All that my careful hand had ironed out

Forced to express my excess love on cloth,”

Carolyn Kizer (1925-2014) represents the modern female poets. In the male-dominated world, she has struggled for the rights of women through her poetry and shaped it in countless ways. Even the New York Time has claimed that she was the feminist practically before the term “*Feminist*” was coined. She stood against the injustice with woman class in the society. This was the time when male poets and critics did not give attention to the “female poetry”; it was Kizer, who came up with her poems having the characteristics of irony and intelligence. She has presented some old mythological and Greek references in her poetry and mixes it up with the modern time images of Europe and western world. This shows her real intellect and knowledge which she has used in her poetry and she has presented her feminist approach and ability. In a beautiful manner with a feminist approach, few lines from her poem “*Fearful Women*” shows her potential:

“Arms and the girl I sing - O rare
arms that are braceleted and white and bare
arms that were lovely Helen's, in whose name
Greek slaughtered Trojan. Helen was to blame
Scape-nanny call her; wars for turf
and profit don't sound glamorous enough
Mythologize your women! None escape
Europe was named from an act of bestial rape”

Her poems are about American cultural life and now at this stage Kizer's initiatives and work must be seen as a bridge for the upcoming female poets. Her poetry has feminist confidence in which she has tried to cross the gaps between change and tradition and amalgamate the formal stanzas, rhyme and free verse combine. She has confessed that in male dominated society, she was less praised for her feminist poems in comparison of her political poems. Her poem presents the true feminist expression in the poem “*Bitch*” in which she says:

“Now, when he and I meet, after all these years
I say to the bitch inside me, don't start growling
He isn't a trespasser anymore
Just an old acquaintance tipping his hat
My voice says, Nice to see you
As the bitch starts to bark hysterically”

Carol Ann Duffy (1955-2009) has always had a strong feminist edge in her poetry. She is best known for writing monologues and love poems. She was a lesbian in her school days at St. Joseph. Her early love poems have clear indication of her homosexuality and sometimes it seems that gender is not specified in her poetry. Most of her poems are based on homosexual love. She uses different imageries in her poem "*Little Red cap*" with feminist approaches:

“ At childhood’s end, the houses petered out
into playing fields, the factory, allotments
kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men
the silent railway line, the hermit’s caravan
till you came at last to the edge of the woods
It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf.”

This poem needs Freudian interpretations of the story about sexual awakening. Presentation of "*Married Men*", factories, wood and other imageries have value in this poem. Different issues of sexuality have been discussed in the poem regarding the love affairs and wishes, which is the true representation of the modern age. She has presented all these subjects with all her feministic soul. Her poem "*Standing Female Nude*" presents the persona of such a character which is very different from the ordinary things and looks quite indifferent in the society. She has provided voices to the voiceless characters by emphasizing and focusing the underprivileged and middle class people who are over shadowed by greater powers. To present all these things in a natural and attractive way, she uses irony and sarcasm. Feminist aspect are very clear and vibrant in her poems. In "*Standing Female Nude*" she introduces a self-proclaimed river whore and presents different shades of society towards her indirectly. That character of whore asks about the motives and value of art of the artist. This poem is a great example of stream of consciousness, presents a character as she poses nude. Poet presents different imageries and engagement of different senses makes the mood and tone of this poem attractive and enables the reader to visualize the situation. She says in "*Standing Female Nude*":

“He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush
repeatedly into the paint. Little man
you've not the money for the arts I sell
Both poor, we make our living how we can
I ask him Why do you do this? Because
I have to. There's no choice. Don't talk

My smile confuses him. These artists
take themselves too seriously. At night I fill myself
with wine and dance around the bars. When it's finished
he shows me proudly, lights a cigarette. I say
Twelve francs and get my shawl. It does not look like
me.”

Findings

This paper shows that women writers have always had to write “against the grain”. From Greek period to modern era, it is evident that women’s conscious struggle has remained active to resist patriarchy. All the female poets have tried to make their place in the male oriented and male dominant world of literature. It was quite difficult in ancient times, Sappho had tried hard to do it in a better way with all her literary and poetic intellect. There have been several allegations on female poets regarding sex and gender issues even in the modern age, one of the main reasons of their homosexuality and to be lesbian that they had a conscious aspect or a kind of revolt in their minds against patriarchy and male dominant world. In modern poetry, it is very clear in most of the poems that female poets have tried to discuss their family and domestic life and want to make it pleasant and healthy. They have shared their relations with male characters in all forms and positions. They also present the attitude and behavior of the male class with them. All the works which have been discussed in this paper shows that woman always tries to find her respective place in the society and when she couldn’t get it in right way, she picks up a pen and paper, pours all her emotions and soul into it, sometimes uses sarcasm and irony, hides her identity when it is needed but in all sort of conditions. She tries to present her inner feelings and emotions in front of the whole world and to make her proper place in the society which is her due right. Female poets have got freedom to write and compose poetry in the modern and post-modern era in comparison with the ancient and Greek times. Subjects have also been changed in poetry according to the modern demands to attract its readers.

Conclusion

All three waves of feminism are the shades of revolt against patriarchy, in which women have struggled to define their identities. Female poets have selected the subjects and themes for their poetry which are associated with domestic life and which has created its impact on the society.

Themes of feminism have remained vibrant in the selected works of female poets. Through this trait, they attracted the readers towards the poetry they have

produced. In the contemporary world, literature has not remained biased towards women as the set examples of the past in which female writers and poets had to conceal their identity. Poetry produced by female poets have different styles but their soul is same, changes of ancient and modern times can be noted but the feelings and emotion of woman is still the same. First, women were fighting for their identity along with love affairs, this aspect is very dominant in the ancient poems. Then women learned to have a respectable status in their domestic lives. Finally, this is very clear that in women writings, affairs like politics, economic conditions, wars, homosexuality, domestic affairs, love and marriage, betrayal and death. The effect can be seen and judged in the context of three waves of feminism.

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