

EXPLORING THE FEMALE SPACES IN THE CONFINES OF THE MALE TRADITION

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Abstract

This paper attempts at exploring the Canon of Autobiography to establish the place of women's writing specifically in respect to the Women's autobiographies. Autobiography as a genre has traditionally been a male domain. Women's life stories were not seen worthy or significant by the dominant tradition. I have attempted to understand the genre of autobiography from the male and female perspective and place the position of women's writing in the modern context basing my findings mostly on the four stages given by Elaine Showalter.

Key Words: Autobiography, Women's Writing, Male tradition

“To write as men write is the aim and besetting sin of women;
to write as women is the real task they have to perform”.

- G.H. Lewis, The Lady Novelists (1852).

Traditionally, Knowledge, truth and reality have been constructed as if men's experience were normative, as if being human meant being male (Interpreting Women's Lives, 1989, 3). Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977, 3) sets the direction of my attempt in exploring the female spaces in the suffocating confines of the Male Tradition and to create a more inclusive and a more human conception of reality that exists in society. It is in the literary genre of autobiography, that women have created a separate and unique Canon as it documents, not just the life of a person but also the realities, historical, political, social, economical, religious, personal and psychological that went into shaping it the way it is.. Be it the life story of the religious mystic Margery Kempe in 1436 or the oldest autobiography by an Indian women, a well known saint poet of Maharashtra, Bahina Bai which dates back to 1700 and was translated into English by Rev. Justin Abbott and published in 1929; the narrative is largely torn by a

repressed rebellion against oppressive confines. Bahina Bai constantly speaks of her awareness of belonging to an “inferior species” and laments on being born in a human body but in the form of a woman. A large number of autobiographies have been written by women but due recognition was never granted and woman’s autobiography remained at the mercy of the male canon. Interestingly, definitions, purpose, ideas about the style of autobiography, the narrator’s self, etc. has all been modeled on a few often cited autobiographies of white male patriarchs like Augustine, Rousseau, Goethe, Mill and Adams.

It is theorists like Wayne Shumaker, Roy Pascal, Georges Gusdorf, B.J. Mandel, Northrop Frye, Marston Balch who defined the rules and form of autobiography as overtly male. A palpable bias towards women’s writing is perceived in their writing. Mandel defines the form and states, “Autobiography is a retrospective account of a man’s whole life (or a significant part of a life) written as avowed truth and for a specific purpose by the man who lived the life.” (Autobiographer’s Art, 1968, 217)

This leads to the question who writes an autobiography and for what purpose and as it is a retrospective account so how much of it is revealed? To this Marston Balch in *Modern Short Biographies and Autobiographies* (nd) points out that “one cannot make demands on the autobiographer. He is a law unto himself. He may begin where he likes and end where he likes. He may tell much or little. He may employ any literary mode. He may uncover the innermost tissues of his soul in stark confusion, or he may merely present a dispassionate record of amusing conversations or random bits of information too. He may present a thorough account of all he has learned about his craft, or he may offer the racy and entertaining story of his career. He may give us a concentrate of his life’s experience in a few shining chapters, or he may prefer the looser scheme and dump in everything. Letters, diaries, marginal notes, doodles, banquet menus, animal pictures or any relatable relic or movements of his public or private experience. (20) Thus the contents of autobiographies are as numerous and diverse as the people who write them. The retrospection gives shape to the life story, and influences the choice of material. Shumaker refers to this as, “a literary simplification of an extremely complex reality” (Shumaker, 1954, 40). The same sentiment is further elaborated by Roy Rascal (1950), he states, “autobiography is a shaping of the past. It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story. It establishes certain stages in an individual life, makes links between them and defines implicitly or explicitly, a certain consistency of relationship between the self and the outer world.” (9) Thus, the autobiographer appears to be a person who is in control, confident, cool, calm and objectively dispassionate and disconnected and aloof despite being in the thick of action. Such a perception would not describe women autobiographers as it is assumed personal account free of conflict and written by someone who is aware of himself and can portray his self, the way he wishes to. Women in society do not enjoy this freedom and often hide their true selves for fear of social contempt and condemnation. James Olney, in *Metaphors of Self* (1972) defines autobiography and says,

“An autobiography, if one places it in relation to the life from which it comes, is more than a history of the past and more than a book currently circulating in the world; it is also, intentionally or not, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (35) thus, the purpose is self-perpetuation. “Man will not let his memory die or his name blotted out if he can prevent it.” (Balch, p.22) In this process the question of dependence on memory also arises. Apart from this, the autobiographical selves of men and women are different and to assume and assign a common rule to judge the work is unwarranted. Pascal (1950) further remarks on autobiography as an instrument for understanding life, “... it demonstrates that it can be not just

the log of things known, but a voyage of discovery, fact and a means of reconciliation.” (51) But the fact remains that the selective persona and distanced, dispassionate and objective stance of the male autobiographers point to a linear form as the autobiographer focuses on his achievement or importance which defines him. Whereas women autobiographers have a collective consciousness; they have been conditioned that their lives are to resolve around the needs of others. They don't have focused goals and hence their autobiographies seem disjointed and non-linear. The male bias which is pervasive in all fields of knowledge makes no exception of the critical canon of autobiography. As mentioned earlier, one finds that in all earlier criticism of this genre i.e. pre-1980 right from Misch to Olney and Pilling, women's autobiographies are either grossly ignored or underestimated. This neglect leads one to question, what led the corpus of autobiographical criticism to bring about this deplorable neglect of women's autobiographies? Why was a wealth of autobiographies written by women so lost?

The earlier critical works on autobiography by George Misch, Anne Burr, and Wayne Shumaker refer to women's autobiographies only in passing and consider it so insignificant that it is hardly given a thought. The views held by later critics like Georges Gusdorf, James Olney and Roy Pascal also tread the beaten track and help only in strengthening this bias. Estelle Jelinek, in *Women's Autobiography* (1980) has also stated numerous subjective biases of male critics regarding women's texts. She has rebuffed the criticism wherein by andocentric standards female autobiography seems disorderly, she prefers the term 'discontinuous', and points out that women's lives are not usually linear, but rather cyclical, repetitive, disjointed and 'other' directed. She remarks, "the narratives of their lives are usually not chronological and progressive [like men's] but disconnected or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters". (Jelinek, 1976, pp10-11)

Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968), which catalogued the stereotypes derogatively applied to women in society, suggested that women's writing was devalued because these same stereotypes and the resulting double standards were applied to women's literature. Women's writing was not judged objectively as writing, Ellman discovered, but viewed through a preoccupation with the fact of their feminine authorship. She says, "Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips." (29)

Barbara Godard in *Gynocritics : Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing* (1987) quotes Annette Kolodny and says that one of the tasks of the feminist critic is to examine, "the dilemma of the male reader who, in opening the pages of a women's book, finds himself entering a strange and unfamiliar world of symbolic significance." (59)

The starkly visible male bias pushed women's autobiographical writings to the fringes and pushed them into the category of lesser forms like memoirs, letters, diaries, etc. thus women were ignored, and even when women's autobiographies are given some scant attention in studies, social bias against the condition or the delineation of their lives seem to predominate over critical objectivity. This social bias can be seen in Estelle C. Jelinek's *Women Autobiography* (1980) where she cites two critics, O.B. Hardison Jr. and Louise Montagne Athearn, who remark on Buckminster Fuller's *Synergetics* (1975) and Kate Millet's *Flying* (1974). While speaking of Fuller's Book, Hardison Jr. says, "It is alternately brilliant and obscure, opaque and short though with moments of poetry. What becomes clear with patience is that the virtues and the liabilities are one.... Primary dissociation occurs in language. Words carry with themselves a vast clutter of attitudes, myths, errors, and sloppy approximations that have nothing to do with what we recognize, on reflection, as reality.... Properly understood it is not English but an artificial

language with --- let it be admitted --- all the liabilities associated with the first version of any complex invention. (4) While Louis Montague Athern's remarks annihilate the intention and style of Flying in one devastating condemnation ... a book? No. It is the personal outpouring of a disturbed lady – albeit genius – whose eclectic life is of more interest to her than to the reader. There is no story line, no plot, and no continuity. Her writing is a frantic stringing together of words without any thought for the ordinary arrangement of noun and verb. It is hard reading. ... It is utter confusion. (4)

Thus, men consider women as emotional and unorganized and because of this pervading bias, as women, their experiences are viewed in conventional terms like heart-break, anger, loneliness, motherhood, humility, confusion and self-abnegation. It becomes clear that women, write differently than men. Despite criticism, Millet refused to emulate Shumaker's (1954) picture of autobiography as "the stepping back of a painter to have a look at the finished canvas." (p.103) she wrote Flying (1974) and kept the narration such that it is suggestive that her writing and our reading of the autobiography are occurring at the same time. Thus, she affirmed the continuum of life, through her autobiography.

Men and women have different perceptions of life. In *Imagining a Self* (1976), the feminist critic Patricia Meyer Spacks has figured autobiography as a means to "exorcise one's past". She says that '... Because the woman who writes actually existed in the world, one accepts her version of her past as a genuine record of identity. She tells us who she is by showing how she sees her experience.' (2) She further goes on to say, "... Autobiography assures its author of his/her existence beyond all possibility of philosophic denial through it he/she comes to terms with his/her past or exorcise it." (19) A point in case is Maya Angelo in whose work one sees the possibility of liberation through the creative act of writing autobiography itself.

Women have different identities than men. In her book *The Female Imagination* (1975), Patricia Meyer Spacks remarks that, "In autobiography, poetry, fiction, women reveal themselves' (10) and it is through this revelation that we see that women write differently from men. Tracing the difference further, she says,

"... For readily discernable historical reasons women have characteristically concerned themselves with matters more or less peripheral to male concerns, or at least skewed from them. the difference between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones make a difference in female writing'. (17) It is because of these preoccupations and roles that women '...emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives – domestic details, family difficulties close friends, and especially people who influenced them'. (7-8) says Estelle C. Jelinek in her Introduction to her book *Women's Autobiography* (1980). She further points out that women soften their writing with, "... humorous and distracting anecdotes" (9). Women use a variety of forms of understatement sometimes even self-deprecating, vague and other-directed. It is important to remember that "women's autobiographies cannot be fully understood in isolation from women's status and experiences within particular cultures and historical periods." (Voss. 1986, 224), she further states that "women are taught to define themselves in relation to others rather than as autonomous selves". Any evidence of female "selfishness, pursuit of one's own priorities, is severely censured" (Voss. 1986, 227) Jade Snow Wong in her autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) not only disarms possible criticism with an apologetic preface but also narrates in the third person. This "submergence of the individual" partly comes from her Chinese heritage. (Voss, 1986, 228) Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Family Portrait* (1970) Margaret Mead's *Blackberry Winter* (1972) Isadora Duncan's *My Life* (1927) all shows a striking illustration of

feminism posing and historical contextual influences. Thus, this garb of projections, self-relegation all lead to the question as to how true is the autobiographer to his/her art? Truth becomes a difficult goal. Conscious efforts to exclude parts of one's life, or to protect others are all reasons for such action. Though Male autobiographers find complete truthfulness a difficult task. But Voss (1986) says this of women autobiographers, "Deception means survival for the powerless: to be successfully feminine means to learn concealment, deceit, the graceful falsehood." (229). As Isadora maintains, "No woman has ever told the whole truth of her life." (p.3). Patricia Meyer Spacks too in "A Chronicle of Women" (1972) says, "self-exposure is dangerous". (157) To elaborate on this Voss (1986) reference to Judy Chicago's experience of revealing her own anger in her autobiography *Through the Flower My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975) is interesting, where she recalls, "I drove home and trembled in terror at the fantasies that told me that something terrible was going to happen because I was saying the Unsayable." (230)

In contrast to these are Kate Millet's *Flying* (1974), and Maya Angelou and Emma Goldman's *Living My Life* (1931) where they are aggressive and assertive and where they claim for women the right to live as autonomous beings. The anger which has been repressed by patriarchy comes forth often in various reactions. Breaking through the silence becomes imperative for women autobiographers. Although their collective identity and social obligations lead them to repress it (anger) most of the times. Speaking of this "collective identity", Sheila Rowbotham in *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973) uses the metaphor of mirrors to describe this. She says that, the prevailing social order stands as a great resplendent hall of mirrors which reflects back an image of the culturally defined women, a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity."(27) Nancy Chodorow (1978) says "the basic feminine self is connected to the world, whereas the basic masculine sense of self is separate and isolated." (199) Thus women's autobiographies project a collective consciousness and collective identity and this has now been accepted and is seen as a "culmination of a long tradition." (Jelinek, 1980, 20)

Virginia Woolf was perhaps the first to discuss the subject of "women and fiction" she asserted that women's writing could not be considered in isolation from the social, economic and political facts that dictate much of women's condition. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) discussed Virginia Woolf and says that, 'Woolf insists that a woman must have an independent income and a room of her own if she is to write fiction, and that the mind of the artist should be androgynous.' (284). She further gave a precondition that the image of the 'Angel of the House' has to be broken by women to write fiction. Julia Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir, Carolyn Heilburn are among the many critics who supported Virginia Woolf in her belief that 'the greatest writing is "androgynous", that women must cultivate their masculine side and men their feminine that people must surpass their sexual limitations in order to produce great writing' (12) says Patricia Meyer Spacks in her book *The Female Imagination* (1975). Up till now, the judgments on women's writing were male views as Ellen Messer – Davidow in her essay 'The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism' in Linda, Kaufman (1989) says, "Gender is so conspicuous in feminist criticisms precisely because it is not recognized aspect of literature, while traditional critics probe their subject of literature, feminist critics juggle a version of Virginia Woolf's tenuously coupled subjects of women and literature." (sic) (70) Simon de Beauvoir's statement echoes the same sentiment when she states 'like the world itself, is the Work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the

absolute truth.” (27). The fact that Woolf herself could never openly speak about her own “self” as she advocated her work has been evaluated and interpreted by many feminist critics as well.

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) rejected the theory of Virginia Woolf and the ‘*Flight Into Androgyny*’. Here, she sets out to prove that, for Woolf the concept of Androgyny was a ‘myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition.’ (264) Critics have had justifications of Woolf’s theory too. In *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) Toril Moi in her introductory chapter ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist Readings of Woolf’ writes, “Far from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that the goal of feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity’. (13)

Showalter comments on Virginia Woolf and says ‘... Virginia Woolf was extremely sensitive to the ways in which female experience had made women weak, but she was much less sensitive to the ways in which it had made them strong’. (285) Thus, she believes that female aestheticism was only a phase of a tradition and not its moment of truth. She writes, ‘Today women novelists are continuing a phase of female self-discovery and self-scrutiny in forms and vocabularies very different from those employed by Woolf.’ (298) Woolf belonged to the first phase of feminism and she provided the foundation and paved the way for women’s studies as an independent branch of knowledge. In the late 1970’s, three major studies appeared on women writers which can be seen as the main contributors to the female literary tradition in the second phase of feminist research.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Toril Moi identifies these three texts as, “Ellen Moers’, *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Taken together, these three books represent the coming-of-age of Anglo-American feminist criticism.” (52) she further states that “All three books strive to define a distinctively female tradition in literature on the grounds that, as Elaine Showalter puts it, “the female literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationships between women writers and their society” (52). *Literary Women* (1978) was perhaps the first attempt to chronicle history of women’s writing and it appeared at the same year when Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was published.

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) concurred with Germaine Greer and spoke about the transience of female literary fame. They felt that the fame of women writers was short-lived and one had to rediscover and start afresh every time. Showalter says, “Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew; forging again and again the consciousness of their sex. Given this perpetual disruption and also self-hatred that has alienated women writers from a sense of collective identity, it does not seem possible to speak of a ‘movement’. (11-12)

Toril Moi (1985) analyses this and says that In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Showalter sets out to describe the female literary tradition in the English novel from the generation of the Brontes to the present day, and to show how the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture. In her efforts to fill in the terrain between the literary landmarks’ of the ‘Austen Peaks, the Bronte Cliffs, the Eliot range and the Woolf Hills’ (vii), she uncovers three major phases of historical development claimed to be common to all literary subcultures. (55) Literary subcultures such as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian, or even American (Showalter, 1977,13). In her most recent work, *A Jury of Her Peers: American*

Women Writer's from Anne Bradstreet to Anne Proulx (2009), Showalter's has added a fourth phase to her existing three major phases of historical development, seemingly common to all literary subcultures. Showalter's (1977 and 2009) Four phases are as follows, "First there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Thirdly, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search of identity. Finally the fourth stage, "a seamless participation in the literary mainstream." (2009, Showalter). According to her the American women had reached this stage by the end of the Twentieth Century and are equipped to take on any subject they want, in any form they choose in the Twenty First Century. An appropriate terminology for women writers' in these stages would be "Feminine", "Feminist", "Female" and "free" (Showalter, xx, 2009).

The Feminine period starts with the appearance of male-pseudonyms in the 1840s and lasts until the death of George Eliot in 1880; the Feminist phase lasts from 1880 until 1920 and the Female phase starts in 1920s until 1990 and finally the most recent "Free" phase which starts after 1990 and is still continuing with a new perspective of self-awareness and a literary market more accepting of works by women writers.

The 'feminine' phase is marked by characteristics wherein a woman wished to be the Angel in The House, content in being second fiddle, basking in the glory of her man, extremely submissive and devoted to her duties as a wife, mother, sister, daughter-in-law, etc. even if she is an achiever, she projects herself to be lesser than her man and invariably gives credit of all her achievements to him. Her projection of self is that of a dependent and helpless feminine person who is desperate for protection and seemingly secure in the realm of her house. Her man is her God. The feminine woman always maximizes the ego of her man and projects herself as the weaker sex, happy to be on the periphery in a state of submission. The 'feminine' phase is thus 'imitative' and the voices are 'muted voices'.

The 'feminist' phase is "a phase of protest against these (cultural) standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy". (Showalter, 1977, 13). These women strongly reacted and revolted against the male tradition and saw men as their primary oppressors. As Showalter (1977) points out, 'The feminists challenged many of the restrictions on woman's self-expression, denounced the gospel of self-sacrifice, attacked patriarchal religion, and constructed a theoretical model of female oppression.' (29) Their anger and need for self-assertion and justification led them to Utopian fantasies and unrealistic demands for changes in society which led to a conflict and War of Sexes and till date negative connotations are associated with the word 'feminist'. By rejecting the traditional role-model, they are eloquent and aware of their rights and demand their own unique space giving importance to education and their own individual needs, though most of these women reject the feminine roles, rejected the male canon and many rejected marriage and the social and cultural roles associated with the female sex. The 'feminist' phase is thus 'eloquent' and 'reactive' and aggressive in nature.

The 'female' phase is a phase of 'self-realization and women in this phase are at peace with their own selves, their sex and their lives. It is a phase of 'self-fulfilled' individuals who are assertive without being threatening entities. They are confident achievers and successfully create their own space in the male dominant culture. As Showalter (1977) says, in the female phase, there was a shift from "feminism to a female phase of courageous self-exploration, but it carried

with it the double legacy of feminine self-hatred and feminist withdrawal”. (35) The woman writers of the ‘Female’ transformed this self hatred and withdrawal into a dignified self-exploration, self-realization and a self-acceptance, thus making a space for their own selves in the male bastion, comfortable with their success, sex and femininity. Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) while referring to *A Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) by Gilbert and Gubar, states, “They apparently believe that there is such a thing as a “distinctive female power’, but that this power, or voice, would have to take a rather roundabout route to express itself through or against the oppressing edicts of the dominant patriarchal modes of reading.” (59)

As in Emily Dickinson’s words, women have chosen to “Tell all the Truth, but tell it Slant” (Franklin, 1998). For Gilbert and Gubar, the female voice is duplicitous, but nevertheless true, and truly female.

In her most recent book *A Jury of Her Peers* (2009) Elaine Showalter expounds upon the Fourth Stage termed “Free” in the chapter titled, ‘The 1990’s: Anything She Wants’ She writes,

“As they approached the twenty-first century, American women writers had traversed the three stages of feminine, feminist, and female writing, and had moved into the fourth stage: free. Asked why she rarely chose to write about women, Annie Proulx replied, “Writers can write about anything they want, any sex they want, any place they want.” No longer constrained by their femininity, women were free to think of themselves primarily as writers, and subject to the same market forces and social changes, the same shifts of popular taste and critical fashion, the same vagaries of talent, timeliness, and luck, as men”(569). This is a stage which assumes that women have reached and achieved a utopian, gender-free marketplace and the acceptance of their work, sexuality and existence is in the mainstream. Women autobiographers under this phase see men as equals and have no sense of inferiority or any compulsion to please anyone.

Apart from the stages that Showalter has given ‘Feminine, Feminist, Female and Free’ her articles, ‘Towards a Feminist Poetics’ (1979) and ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’ (1981) also discuss the position of women’s writing in the male tradition. The first is concerned with woman as a reader, which she calls ‘Feminist Critique’ and the second deals with woman as writer which she calls ‘gynocritics’. Showalter tells us that ‘Feminist Critique’ which deals with works of male authors is ‘a historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena’ (25). While ‘gynocritics’ she says, is ‘the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women’ as well as the ‘psychodynamics of female creativity’ and ‘studies of particular writers and works’. (25) She further says that ‘Gynocritics forces itself from pondering to male values and seeks to focus on the newly visible world of female culture.’ (28). Similar view is expressed by Tharu and Lalitha (1991) while referring to women’s writing in India. They define the politics of feminist criticism in terms of learning “to read [them]... in a new way... to read them not for the moments in which they collude with or reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class, nation, or empire, but for the gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in them.” (35)

Mark Shechner succinctly summarizes, “By the 1990’s, women novelists were under no obligation to gratify a meddling sisterhood any more than to mollify a scandalized patriarchy, but only, as artists, to express and please themselves.”(220-38)

Thus while exploring the female spaces in the confines of the Male Tradition and understanding the positioning of the voices of women through their autobiographical writing one realizes the way women’s writing has evolved, struggled and finally succeeded in carving a niche in the dominant culture.

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