

## Identity and voice in 'female literature': The interplay of language, gender, identity, and ethnicity.

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### ABSTRACT

#### Identity and voice in 'female literature': The interplay of language, gender, identity, and ethnicity.

The idea of identity which is an essential element of every human's life and makes itself a crucial ingredient in various forms of art, especially in writing. There are numerous events in history which questions identity and brings forth the idea of marginalization and identity crisis.

Literature as a medium of expression and representation, has raised up many issues such as the complexities of various languages which gets further problematic within the discourses of gender disparity. The place a woman gets in any society is doubly marginalized as the language she uses is driven from the male's world and her writings can only be studied in the masculine standards, which apparently leads to the marginalization of their work and then, they themselves get marginalized. The struggle to form an identity within a world which is guided by the discourses of boundaries and politics. It is difficult to give a static meaning to it. Therefore the idea of identity is in a flux, it is constantly been deconstructed and questioned.

This conceptualization of identity has led to innumerable discourses under the notion of ethnicity, nationality, psychology, culture, gender, and race.

Authors such as Elaine Showalter, Luce Irigaray, Juliet Mitchell, Michele Barrett and many others have talked about "*female schizophrenia of authorship*" and many other issues in relation to it.

Showalter even coined the term "Gynocriticism" to analyze women's writings. This paper aims to explore the idea of language, identity, ethnicity and culture within 'female writing tradition' under the backdrop of history and contemporary politics of 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the help of various novels and essays such as, "*Unruly Tongue: Identity and voice in American women's writing*" 1850-1930 By Martha J. Cutter, "*Little Women*" by Louisa May Alcott, and etc.

## Identity and voice in 'female literature': The interplay of language, gender, identity, and ethnicity.

Language, culture, religion, gender and ideologies are the tools with which our society constructs identity. But ideas change, society evolves and the idea of identity becomes fluid. As progress never takes place in stagnation, therefore, deconstructing the conventional norms becomes a necessity.

When the notion of identity comes into being it brings along with it a number of questions, and among those questions, the most debated ones are, what makes one's identity? Is identity only based upon 'physical sexual dichotomy'; what are the formed ideologies behind the construction of an identity? And does knowledge and power play any role in the formation of identity? These questions will touch various branches of the society and different bodies of knowledge such as psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology and a few others.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the feminist movements began to take place. Simone de Beauvoir wrote a book "The Second Sex" which explores the various aspects of a woman's problems for her being a woman. In her book she criticizes Monsieur Benda by declaring in Uriel's Report:

*"A man's body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man. And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called the sex, meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him, she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."*

From Edward Said's book, Orientalism came the definition of "Other", the term is in itself an identity for the ones who came from the "Orient", who were considered inferior and ultimately were marginalized. So here identity forms through understanding the opposite of self as the 'Other'. This notion of marginalization is well explored by Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak in her essay "Can the subaltern speak?" Where she contemplates the notion of dominant voice which controls the majority of language. So what type of language is available for womankind? And isn't women being doubly marginalized for her being a "second sex" in the first place and then having no language of her own as Juliet Mitchell in her essay "Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis" describes language as phallogentric, she explains the idea of world and its language being a phallogentric through a psychoanalytic case, she also says that no matter how much a woman speech resists, it will still be imbibed with the "masculine linguistic norms."

Juliet Mitchell who is a Marxist feminist further brings in the whole discourse under capitalism, where she talks about the advent of the novel in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the autobiographies written by women and the idea 'subjecthood'. She writes "*there are several famous men novelist, but the vast majority of early novels were written by a large number of women. These writers were trying to establish what critics today call 'the subject in process'. What they were trying to do was to create history from the flux, a flux in which they were feeling themselves in the process of becoming women within a new bourgeois society. It was by reading and writing novels that constructed themselves as the 'women' they came to be.*"

The perception that forms about a subject are also through the idea of lack, a female lacks phallus which is symptomatic of masculinity, therefore, feminity is seen as a lack of what masculinity is.

The notion of the "subject" which was under construction required a language to form its identity. Jacques Lacan who discusses natural acquisition of language by a child who comes from "imaginary order" to the "symbolic order" that is from the world of mother's womb to the father's world of language which is governed by phallogentric laws and norms. The pioneer of feminist theory Elaine Showalter explores the similar idea of forming a "female literary tradition" in her book "A Literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing", where she talks about a utopian world in which the entire literature produced by women were separated and liberated from the masculine language, for which Cynthia Ozick termed it as an "ovarian theory of literature". Which dedicated entirely to women and their writings which defined women from a woman's perspective. Therefore the idea of language performs a crucial role in not just only forming an identity

but also in determining the meaning of it. Meanings are not formed independently but seen through the lens of culture and tradition. It also carries within it the notion of gender and the role cultural fixes with it, which demarcates the distinction between a male and a female.

It isn't difficult to find out what is masculine culture or Patriarchy, as it has been spread around the world since the classical time to the modern age. There have been many instances describing, promoting, supporting and strengthening it. From the different cultures and traditions what is received is its different ways of functioning. It has been captured and presented by a number of art forms such as folklore, art, drama and Literature. One element in all these art forms is language, they all carry a language which is either spoken, written or performed. These cultures are performative and performance is what makes traditions. The culture and tradition also assign various roles and professions to race, caste, and gender in accordance with the power relation and domination in which a body becomes a battleground for various ideologies. In the words of Judith Butler, "*The body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriate and interpretative will determine a cultural meaning for itself.*" The derivation of meaning is also culturally and ethnically embedded. Language is one in many ways of communication and representation. Clothes, fashion, style, haircut and symbols like vermilion mark and other accessories, also build up a boundary between a man and a woman. Even today there are a number of communities which do not allow women to choose an attire of their own choice. The biological difference is not the only reason for such disparity but religion has taken a major role in defining and giving identities. When religion amalgamates with politics, it makes all the more difficult to find liberating space for women. Women's body not only carry cultural signification but also embodies moral religious identity. Nathaniel Hawthorne's '*The Scarlet Letter*' portrays the protagonist Hyster Prynne as an adulteress in the puritan ideological society. She was condemned to wear a letter "A" on her chest, as a symbol of punishment, the puritan society gave her an identity of an "adulteress" along with her body was objectified into the letter "A" which displayed the puritan meaning of punishment. Hawthorne by giving multiple meanings to the letter "A" signified the blindness of religious ideologies. He mentions in the first chapter of the novel that "*the old scarlet letter,*

*could not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation.”- (‘the custom house’, pg.39)*

This whole idea of interpretation sets against the static meanings that a religion produces. Religious ideologies are often constituted by sentiments, superstitions and gender relations. It generally perceives things as either black or white, and for Puritans meaning resides in an object, therefore, Hawthorne talks about the need of interpretations and even goes against his Puritan ancestors to gain a deeper insight of the meaning of the letter “A” as abler, and angel.

Michele Barrett’s in her essay “Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender” questions the images portrait through paintings, photographs, and advertisement. She says that these forms of art, objectify a women’s body to fit in the larger discourse of capitalism. She analysis various advertisements and paintings, she takes up a classic example of John Berger’s ‘female nude painting tradition’. A woman’s body is made as a “sight” to be seen and admired. It not only gives out a message of perfect body type but also reduces the body to just a painting or a photograph which has a certain market value but no intellectual worth. The 21st-century magazine’s cover page are much in the debate as they project a perfect kind of female beauty which is artificial as against the natural imperfect body. They ironically advertise artificial products to make one naturally beautiful. These are the market strategies to increase market production and profits as this world of capitalism depends upon profits.

The world has progressed from oral traditions to reading, writing, and printing. The invention of printing machine gave rise to a flourishing culture of journals, magazine, and novels. It initiated the writing tradition on the larger scale, reading became an integral part of clubs where literary intellects could meet and formulate new criticism and writings. Writings which were not entirely created by men but there were women too, who produced literature with many hardships but under a male pseudonym. Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott are a few famous female authors who had voiced the female desire, sufferings, lack of space and no choice for a profession. Charlotte Bronte records in her semi-autobiographical book Jane Eyre that, “*women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and*

*it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings,... it is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced for their sex."*

- (Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, chapter- 12, page-95)

Which raised many eyebrows and bring forth multiple criticisms, Jane Eyre and along with it many novels such as Little Women by Louisa May Alcott under the pseudonym of A.M Barnard, which has a number of autobiographical elements just Jane Eyre. A woman of knowledge has only one profession to take up, which was of the governess. Therefore these female writers had got together to explore the idea of marriage which was the only available choice for the most of the women. Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice is a novel which revolves around this very idea of marriage and what makes one an accomplished young lady for it, for which Miss Caroline Bingley enlisted a few important skill required for any young lady, "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern language, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions..." - ( Pride and Prejudice, pg. 27, chapter- 8) these lines not only reaffirm the patriarchal standards but also deconstructs it in its larger frame of the narrative. It analyses marriage as an institution, where a woman needs to follow certain guidelines laid by the society in order to coexist. Luce Irigaray a feminist and a psychoanalyst delivers a powerful analysis on women as an independent and self-sufficient sex but has got trapped in the social construct and its gendered roles. She says women are commodified in the trade of exchange or exogamy in patriarchal term so therefore marriage becomes an archetype of exchange, women acquire a social value as "goods of exchange". Irigaray in her book "This sex which is not one" observes this whole idea taken from Levi-Strauss that "women figures only as one of the objects in the exchange not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place." This also states the whole idea of private marriage in terms of public market of exchange; the daughter or sister is offered to another family which starts a cycle of exchange under the law. It is even practiced today as it marks itself a tradition and culture affair. She offers a utopian model by bringing all women together to rebel against this whole culture of exchange and refuse to go the market because she says that the exchange is only between man and man, (it's homosexual).

The society is “homosocial” but it’s intriguing to think what it does to actual homosexuals? Why doesn't the society accept gay men? Precisely, because it brings in the concept of the pleasure principle, the fear of everybody perceiving “sex as pleasure” will not only hit the cultural norms of the society but also it will be a big threat to the “market of exchange.” Heterosexuality is necessary for reproduction. She also talks about contraceptive pills and abortions through which women can have sex without taking up maternal identity.

She criticizes Freud for ignoring female homosexuality, her writings have formulated multiple perception and interpretations. She even discusses the female principle and the male principle, as she believed in biology and anatomy which decides who is male and female, but it’s the psyche that decides who wants to be a man or a woman. The biological difference can’t give a static identity of gender because “being a male or female happens at birth but it evolves with time.” Judith Butler in her book “*Gender Trouble: feminism and subversion of identity*” says that:

*“A split is introduced in the feminist subject by the distinction between sex and gender. Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed.”- (The compulsory order of sex/gender/desire pg.6)*

Butler also gives the idea of gender as performance, which also reflects upon the notion of “gender role play,” society prepares a certain set of roles to be performed by men and women, there were several manuscripts, describing an ideal woman and also giving reasons for why they need to become “the angel of house”. Society works on the principle of fear and honor and that is why there were poetries, stories, and novels narrating about the kind of humiliation suffered by those who tried to defy the already set up norms of the society and they also play the role of moral policing. Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘*Goblin Market*’ is a remarkable poetry which voices out women’s fear of market, the idea of sisterhood and in subtle tone gives out a moral. The poem revolves around two sisters, one of whom, out of curiosity steps into the market sphere which leads her to her severe ailment and the other sister who becomes her savior. This poem reflects two ideas, one that a woman’s curiosity is dangerous and the other is that it forms a utopian microcosmic world only for women where the female characters exclude the male world. The role of hero is performed by Lizzie, she saves Laura and also nurtures her with her maternal care after which they

both lived happily ever after. It seemed that Rossetti had internalized the patriarchal norms as she ultimately shifts the last scene of action from the marketplace to the domestic private sphere which appears to “endorse typical Victorian middle-class values regarding the role of women.” The poem certainly celebrates the idea of home and private sphere as against the idea of the unknown marketplace. It signifies that a woman’s identity is often marked as a “home maker”, no matter how much she grows and evolves her identity will always arise from the idea of “home”. In other words woman means “home-the private sphere” whereas a man identified the public world, just like goblins in the poem belonged to the market world and the two sisters were supposed to be at “home”.

This whole idea of private and public which aligns with the notion of home as private and world as public is entirely a society based concept, just like white means purity and black means evil or dirty, though the meaning of it differs from society to society. It is intriguing to understand how colors give identity and different meanings. Humans are like different colors on a canvas. Just as one single shade can’t define the entire picture, similarly there’s no single concept, or set of norms that will define a gender and give it an identity. It is a multi-structured idea which depends upon perception and the mind. So, therefore, it is now necessary to understand the concept psychologically more than physiologically because even politics is game played with the mind intermingling with the idea of power.

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