

Men and Women Writing Women: The Female Perspective and Feminism in U.S. Novels and African Novels in French by Male and Female Authors

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ABSTRACT

Many critics believe that because men and women have different life experiences, the writing of male and female authors will differ, as well. Some believe that male authors are not able to write accurately from the female perspective or present feminist ideals because they have not experienced life as women. The majority of the time, life from the female point of view is portrayed in literature by women authors, but male authors have also taken on the female perspective. When writing about women it is possible that authors will describe them differently depending on gender, nationality, and culture. To explore these issues, I have studied the representation of women in four novels: two African novels in French and two U.S. novels in English by male and female writers from each culture. By studying these primary texts and analyzing secondary sources about the writing styles of men and women, as well as they ways in which women are represented in literature, I have gained insights into the question of whether the gender of the author affects the way he or she writes about women.

INTRODUCTION

Gender plays an important role in the lives of human beings, starting at the moment of their birth when they are given a blue blanket or a pink blanket and sent forward on a path that will turn them into what their culture considers proper men or women. From the very first breaths, humans are taught to follow a strict code of behavior that differs depending on their sex. In a patriarchal society, this often means that a male will lead a privileged life in which he is thought to be the standard for human experience and the female will lead a subjugated, subservient life in which she is defined only in relation to males. Forcing men and women to fit into gender roles is damaging as it leads to the belief that these roles represent truth, causing gender stereotypes to endure. It also forces men and women to experience life only from their point of view as men or women, not as human beings. If art is a reflection of life, then one would expect that literature would present worlds in which these gender roles exist and women experience life far differently from men and suffer because of it. Gender roles are hard to dispel, but some male authors have attempted to see life from a woman's perspective. I have researched the representation of women by male authors to see whether or not these stereotypes persist and if the male authors give an accurate reflection of the woman's experience. In addition, I have studied the representation of women in literature by female authors both as a comparison to the male authors and to answer the question of whether or not female authors can automatically be defined as feminist.

THE THEORIES

The majority of feminist theorists are women; however, I discovered one male who discussed men who write from the female perspective. Alan Williamson explains his ideas in the introduction to his book *Almost a Girl: Male Writers and Female Identification*. He focuses on the difficulties that many male authors have with writing from the female perspective. He writes first about gender issues:

Certain emotions, certain basic human motives (including ... narcissistic display, intense awareness of one's own body, tender self-surrender, vulnerability) are typed by are culture as 'feminine.' So the man who experiences them – or, especially, who finds them predominant in his own psychic makeup – may face a crisis of gender identity. (1)

The men Williamson describes may also feel “shame” at not being accepted as “real men” because of their ability to identify with women. If men do not fit into their prescribed gender roles, then they will not be seen as true members of their sex. Another issue that male authors deal with is backlash from feminists. Williamson admits that in the past, feminist ideas from men “served as propaganda,” thus, producing suspicion from women that lingers still today (2). He denounces feminist critics stating:

Feminist criticism has felt the need to emphasize how hard it is for men *really* to imagine what women experience. It has been quick to smell preemption, rather than legitimate empathy, whenever male writers attempt to represent a female point of view. They fear that they will perpetuate stereotypes, offer up straw men, or rather straw women, so that the patriarchal side can have the last word, or, at best, steal insights women writers deserve the chance to express for themselves. (2)

Williamson feels that today’s male authors are still being held accountable for the ways in which past male authors used feminist ideas against women. This is a discouraging idea, because if today’s feminist critics are not willing to look beyond past mistakes, they are preventing themselves from reading and studying literature that would offer new understanding of the sexes. This kind of thinking only reinforces gender roles that can be as damaging to men as they are to women. If men continue to be seen as patriarchal and sexist, then they may never see themselves as anything different, and may resist change, thinking it is futile.

Williamson also notes that many of the “female-identified” male authors he has studied have actually been very unhappy with the real women in their lives. To explain, he cites the work of Jessica Benjamin who focuses on the psychology of “female-identified” male writers. Benjamin feels that understanding the oedipal stage allows understanding of the male author as a whole. During the oedipal stage, “commonality between son and mother” exists which includes “emotional attunement, sharing states of mind, empathically assuming the other’s position, and imaginatively perceiving the other’s needs and feelings” (5). These are character traits which are commonly associated with women, and during the oedipal stage the male child possesses these traits in relation to his mother. However, once the oedipal stage is over, the male must identify with his father and his masculine side which leads to grief over the lost bond with his mother. The male child either turns this grief into anger – which is the negative effect—or he tries to regain the bond he shared with his mother by re-identifying with women – which is the positive effect. Writing from the female perspective allows male authors to achieve re-identification. As for the anger that can develop, Lori Saint-Martin, a literary theorist, writes in the introduction to her essay “Feminist Readings of Contemporary Male Writers,” that she believes male authors sometimes act out their aggression toward real-life women—or the feminist movement—on female characters in their works. Again, literature becomes an outlet for the emotions that develop after the oedipal stage. Saint-Martin does note, like Williamson, that other male authors do portray women honestly.

While Williamson describes the motives behind female-identified male authors, the majority of female theorists do not offer explanations for male writers as he does. In the essay “‘The Blank Page’ and Issues of Female Creativity,” Susan Gubar states that male writers often use literature as a way to create women the way they would like them to be created; women are the “blank page” upon which the male writer writes. In other words, the female is not yet complete until the male author has finished her. If the male sees a female as a “blank page,” she is never the creator nor does she have the power to create herself.

Another theorist, Judith Kegan Gardiner, bases her theories of gender in literary criticism on differences in life experiences of men and women. Like Williamson, she believes that men and women live differently because of their sex; therefore, these gender differences will be reflected in their writing. In her essay, “On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” Gardiner states, “women’s experiences differ from men’s in profound and regular ways” (178). She explains further, “In a male dominated society, being a man means not being like a woman. As a result, the behavior considered appropriate to each gender becomes severely restricted and polarized” (189). Kegan Gardiner believes that these differences in experience will be apparent in the writing. She gives examples of the characteristics of women’s writing that differ from men’s writing: “recurrent imagery and distinctive concept ... for example, imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of child care” (178). As for men’s writing, “male fiction often splits characters into disjunct fragments, while female characters in novels by women tend to dissolve and merge into each other (185). Finally, she states, “female identity is a process” (179). Gender influences development of the personality, which in turn, influences writing.

Other theorists believe that male authors may initially seem as though they are feminist in their writing, but that is not always the case. In the introduction to the book *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism*, editors Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland write, “For to write against patriarchy as a male fettered by it does not necessarily result in writing for liberation of gender bondage, a primary aim of philosophical and practical

feminism. 'Feminist' tends to imply a political agenda" (3). With deep analysis, the reader may discover that the male author may have his own agenda in mind, rather than a feminist one.

Many female critics believe that male authors write inadequately from the female perspective. Therefore, it is not surprising that they believe that women are more capable of writing from the female perspective. As with male authors, many theorists believe that identity is also very important when discussing female authors. Susan Gubar believes that men see women as "blank pages," but that women sometimes also see themselves in this way, using writing to re-create themselves. The female author is deeply involved in her work, because it is often considered a re-shaping of herself, whereas the male author is creating something outside of himself.

Judith Kegan Gardiner also emphasizes identity as being an important factor in women's writing. Just as Williamson had a theory about the way male identity is formed, Gardiner has one about the formation of female identity and its relation to literature. She explains: "Female identity formation is dependent on the mother-daughter bond . . . the maternal metaphor of female authorship clarifies the woman writer's distinctive engagement with her characters and indicates an analogous relationship between woman reader and character" (179). In other words, the female author often sees her female protagonist as her "daughter," and women readers will recognize this in the text, relating it to their own identity which has been formed because of a mother-daughter bond. In addition, she believes, "The woman writer uses her text, particularly one centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic identification with her character" (187). It is very clear that Gardiner believes that women writers are much more attuned to their writing—as well as their female audience—because it is representative of themselves.

Another female theorist, Annis Pratt, focuses on the ways in which gender roles affect the way women write in her book *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. "Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender," she writes (6). Pratt believes that gender roles are not only oppressive to women in real life, but in literature as well. She strongly argues that the effects of patriarchy are apparent in novels written by women. She writes that in women's novels, there is "a clear sense that we [women] are outcasts in the land, that we have neither a homeland of our own nor an ethnic place within society" (6). She continues, adding, "Our quests for being are thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do, which is different from what men are told to be and to do" (6). We can assume that Pratt means to say that awareness of a male-dominated society would not be present in novels written by male authors because they have not been negatively affected by it in real life, and if one belongs to an elite class, he assumes his experience to be the experience of everyone. While women's novels do often reflect the oppression of women and its effects, she recognizes the desire to overcome this oppression as well. She writes, "For three hundred years the woman's novel has been a repository of not merely horrors but hopes" (12).

Literary Feminisms by Ruth Robbins also discusses female writers. She begins with some history of female writers. She writes that writing became an accepted occupation for a woman because it didn't overshadow her domestic duties. She was allowed to create female characters that were assertive and independent in a fictitious world while remaining a wife and mother in real life (35). However, Robbins points out, "Self-expression was mediated through the lens of whatever ideologies of femininity were current at a given moment" (35). Robbins follows the theory of social construction which states that everything, even personal identity is influenced and formed by interactions with members in one's society. This means that if a woman writer had never been exposed to feminism, it would not be a part of her identity, and therefore, not evident in her writing. While literature offered an escape to women writers, progressive feminist ideas were not always present. To further explain, Robbins states, "The images we see or read about are part of the context in which we live" (51). A large amount of feminist literature theory has focused on past female-centered novels by men rather than contemporary ones. If past works by females didn't always have feminist themes, then past work by male authors mostly likely would not either. Society's views of women have changed and gender roles are not as strictly enforced. This can be seen through "The Second Wave" of feminism which occurred in the United States alongside the Civil Rights movement. If these ideas weren't already present in society, then they wouldn't be found in the writing of that time. It only makes sense that past novels would reflect different ideas about women than today's novels. If modern feminists focused on contemporary novels by male authors, one can assume that their conclusions would be different.

In addition, Robbins agrees with many other feminist critics that inaccurate portrayals of women in literature are detrimental. She discusses Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is considered to be one of the first feminist writings. Robbins writes, "For Mary Wollstonecraft, the prevalence of misconceived representations of women as meek, obedient, passive and pretty, was an evil because such representations had real effects in the development of real women's lives" (51). Again, social construction plays a part here. If women read patriarchal accounts, they may accept them as truths and even change their beliefs about women. It is especially

dangerous if women write patriarchal novels, because women readers may think that all women feel that way, and again submit to gender stereotypes.

Finally, the way in which novels are perceived by readers depends on the sex of the author. Males have often been thought to represent universal experience. Judith Keegan Gardiner quotes another critic, Carolyn Heilbrun, who states that “women novelists assume ‘only a man can stand for the full range of human experience, moving through action and quest to achievement or failure’” (185). This stereotype can be very damaging to women authors as they may feel as though they are incapable of writing stories about life and meaning, and may not attempt it. If readers believe these stereotypes, they will have pre-judgments about the text and the author’s abilities, and gender roles will never evolve. Another detrimental stereotype is that male authors are assumed to write about truths and meanings, while female authors are assumed only to describe experiences. If this were true, I would argue that women have never been allowed to live the kinds of lives in which truths could be discovered. In many novels by men in which the search for meaning is the focus, the male protagonist is independent and goes out into the world alone to discover what life is and what meaning it holds. Women, who have lived subservient experiences, are taught to put others first, especially their husbands and children, and if a woman doesn’t then she is considered incomprehensible for “abandoning” her family. If woman is not encouraged – or allowed – to lead the kind of life that fosters the discovery of truths, she will never be able to create her own meaning, or meaning that others might accept as their own (i.e. readers).

This research has helped to give me an overview of feminist theory, as well as allowed me to be more critical in revisiting the novels that I have chosen to study. I was more aware of the presence of gender ideologies in the novels and was better able to critique the authors’ use of feminist ideas.

THE NOVELS

The four novels that I chose for this research project are *She’s Come Undone*, *La Femme du Mari Inconnu* (*The Wife of the Unknown Husband*), *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Une Si Longue Lettre* (*So Long a Letter*). *She’s Come Undone* was written by Wally Lamb, an American man, in 1992. It tells the difficult life story of Dolores Price, who struggles with obesity, abandonment, and rape, among many other things. It is told from the first-person-female-perspective. *La Femme du Mari Inconnu* (*The Wife of the Unknown Husband*) is a short story written by Edgar Okiki Zinzou, a man from Benin, in 1995. *La Femme du Mari Inconnu* portrays Cicavi, a poor young woman living in rural Benin who is offered in marriage to a stranger by her mother in exchange for a large sum of money. She is abandoned by her new husband and realizes that she is pregnant. It is written in the third-person-female-perspective. *The Joy Luck Club* is a novel written by Amy Tan, a Chinese-American woman, in 1989. This novel interweaves the life stories of four best friends who left China during World War II and their daughters. There is a strong theme of mother-daughter bonding. It is written in the first-person from many different female perspectives. *Une Si Longue Lettre* (*So Long a Letter*), is a novel written by Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese woman, in 1979. In this novel, Ramatoulaye is a Senegalese woman writing a letter shortly after her husband’s death to her best friend who has moved to the United States. A few years earlier, Ramatoulaye’s husband married a second, much younger wife (as is allowed in the Muslim faith), who also happens to be a friend of their daughter. He abandons Ramatoulaye and their children, but she stays married to him.

There are some similarities in the texts from both male and female authors. In all of the works tragic events occur in the women’s lives. These include rape, abandonment, divorce, forced marriage, and war, and many happen because of actions by men. Despite the difficult lives of the female protagonists, all of the novels and the short story have positive or hopeful endings. Another similarity is the occurrence of generational differences, especially those regarding women’s issues. The older women in the novels tended to agree with traditional ideas of gender, while younger women expressed more contemporary ideas. All of the authors displayed sympathy toward their characters and the female condition, and finally, in many of the situations, the women either deal with their problems themselves or ask for help from other women. Overall, the representations of women presented by male and female authors from U. S. and African cultures were positive.

There are many differences in the works, as well. The first is cultural difference of both the authors and the characters. The stories take place in different parts of the United States, Africa, and China. In addition, the mother-daughter relationships are stronger in the novels written by women. In Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*, there is a cultural bond between mother and daughter because of their Chinese heritage, as well as a spiritual bond for the daughter who still feels connected to her mother even after her death. In Mariama Bâ’s *Une Si Longue Lettre*, the daughter is loyal to her mother over her father after he marries a second wife. Edgar Okiki Zinzou’s *La Femme du Mari Inconnu* presents an overall positive relationship between the mother and daughter, although the mother does give her daughter away to be married to a wealthy man. Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone* also contains positive female

relationships, but those between mother and daughter are strained. The female characters shut themselves off from each when they have traumatic experiences, and the mother spends time away in a mental institution. Also, feelings of self-doubt by the daughters are very strong in Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, as well as the need to please.

These works also differed in the ways in which the women acted after traumatic events. In the novels written by men, the women make very dramatic, physical changes in their lives; they take action. In Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, Dolores first begins to eat more and more and gains a lot of weight; then later on when she decides to take control of her own fate, she very actively pursues Dante in hopes of making him fall in love with her. In *La Femme du Mari Inconnu*, Cicavi takes matters into her own hands and goes to the city to find the stranger who married and then abandoned her. In the women's novels, the protagonists' actions aren't as drastic. In *Une Si Longue Lettre*, Ramatoulaye stays married to her husband, even though he has abandoned their family and lives with his second wife. And in the *Joy Luck Club*, the daughters, while upset about their mothers' criticism, accept it as part of their mother's personalities. When one character does confront her mother, she listens to her reasoning and realizes that her mother has weaknesses as well, but the mother never really changes the way she acts. The characters' reactions – action versus acceptance – after traumatic events depended on the gender of the author. Action is a stereotypically male characteristic. Thus, in the novels written by male authors, the female protagonists embody the male trait of action. Conversely, acceptance is probably more typical for those who have been oppressed – the women – especially if they do not know what other options they may have. In the novels written by female authors the female protagonists possess the female trait of acceptance.

In my research, I focused mainly on the way in which women were portrayed in the novels written by male authors. This is because – according to Claridge and Langland's definition and my own ideas – I would consider the novels written by women as feminist novels. As for the novels by the male authors, Lamb's *She's Come Undone* is a rather well-known novel, and it gained a lot of attention for his ability to write as a female. A review from *People* magazine on the book cover reads, "This male writes so convincingly in the voice of a female ... that you have to keep looking at the back at the jacket picture just to make sure" (*People*). Many readers were also impressed by his ability to write from the female perspective, including the "compassion" he showed for women (Rhodes). It makes me wonder whether or not this novel would have been as popular or as acclaimed had it been written by a female. Most likely, critics and audiences would have accepted it as another work about a woman's experience in a man's world. When asked about his writing during a radio interview Lamb admits to having help with his insights into the female world, and it brings up the question of whether he would have come to these same conclusions on his own (*Washington Post*). The only issue that I had with Lamb's novel was that at the end, after Dolores had moved past all of her traumatic experiences and healed herself, she was pushed to find a man who would finally complete her and bring her true happiness. She isn't allowed to be independently happy. All characters, male and female, push her to marry.

Edgar Okiki Zinzou's *La Femme du Mari Inconnu*, is not very well known. Therefore, there are no critical reviews for this short story. I do, however, think that he gives an honest portrayal and raises awareness about the lives of women who aren't left with many options in life. He shows a lot of sympathy for his characters.

I not only think that the male authors I have studied have accurately portrayed life from a female perspective, but that they sincerely portrayed the distress and the sense of loss felt by their female protagonists after traumatic events. Both Lamb and Zinzou show insight into the female mind-set and the female world. They have successfully crossed gender lines.

CONCLUSION

I have made several discoveries throughout my research that have increased my knowledge of writing and gender theory. These discoveries have allowed me to analyze female protagonist literature more critically. The first discovery is that male authors have not written many novels exclusively from a woman's viewpoint. Some reasons may be that men are really incapable of writing from the female perspective or that they fear that they will be met with too much skepticism (for example, Williamson's statement that women are suspicious of feminist views in men's writing). It is also possible that male authors feel that they could be chastised for being too "feminine" and not fitting into the masculine gender role. The second discovery that I have made is that much of the research in this field is done by women. A simple reason would be that women would be considered "the experts" on the female race. However, it is possible that male authors would contribute to the research, but they may feel out of place or as if they don't have enough authority on the subject. Thirdly, the majority of feminist theory has focused on past works by male authors. Although we still live in a patriarchal world, society's beliefs about women have changed over the course of time. Therefore, today's novels should reflect contemporary gender ideologies. If this is the case, I would say that feminist theorists are not being fair by disregarding recent works by male authors. It is possible that

the omission can simply be explained by the “test of time” approach to literary criticism, however I feel that it is detrimental to both men and women to continue to promote the idea that male writers – or men, in general, if the writers are assumed to be representatives of their society – have not progressed since the Victorian Age. Furthermore, focusing on past beliefs about gender causes traditional stereotypes about men and women to endure as audiences are influenced by what they read. Lastly, I have come to the conclusion that literary theories do not necessarily represent truths. Instead, they represent the reactions that one has to a text, the images and ideas that it provokes. Studying theory helped me to understand gender from differing viewpoints; however, I could not accept that everything I read was completely true. Finally, throughout my research, I kept in mind that gender is socially constructed. It represents accepted ideas about what it means to be male and female. Gender rules can deter male writers from trying on the female persona, as well as influence the critics who may assume that male authors are unable to do so. In addition, strict gender ideals leave little room for differences, forcing readers to assume that all male writers are patriarchal and all female writers are feminist. As seen by my research, this is not the case.

I have read a lot of interesting theories on gender and its effects on literature. Through my research, I am pleased to find that in the novels I have studied, men are capable of writing from the female perspective in a way that is accurate, respectful, and progressive. These male authors have strived to diminish gender roles and stereotypes by showing the ways in which women can be damaged by patriarchal societies and by creating positive female characters. I hope that as more research is done on contemporary male authors who write from the female perspective, the views of the critics will change and this small genre will grow. I have really enjoyed working on this project and I feel as though I have learned a lot, even if I don’t agree with some of the theories about male authors that I have read.

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