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Treatment of feminism in the fiction of A.S. Byatt: A study

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Abstract

Byatt is a British novelist whose writing is really based on the life which the writer has personally experienced in life and tries to interpret it in the form of art. It is the novel innovation of inventing the suffering which generally remains hidden bagged her coveted Booker Prize award for fiction.

Keywords: *Strobilanthes cuspidata*, antioxidant, cytotoxicity, DPPH, Vero cell lines

Introduction

Antonia Susan Byatt nee Drabble was born in 1936 in Yorkshire. She was educated at a Quaker school in York and at Newnham College, Cambridge, Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, and Somerville College, Oxford, where she did her post-graduation. She taught in the Extra-Mural Department of London University and in the Central School of Art and Design, and in 1972 became a full-time Lecturer in English and American Literature at University College, London. To devote full time on writing, she left the job in 1983. She traveled widely overseas to lecture and talk about her work, often with the British Council, and became the Chairman of the Society of Authors between 1986 and 1988. She was a member of the Literature Advisory Panel for the British Council between 1990 and 1998. She has served on the judging panels for a number of literary prizes, including the Booker Prize for Fiction, and is recognized as a distinguished critic, contributing regularly to journals and newspaper including the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Independent* and *The Sunday Times* as well as to BBC radio and television programmes. She was also a member of the Kingman Committee on the Teaching of English Language [1987-8].

For example, the image of an attractive woman to be pencil thin makes a self-destructive stereotype, if accepted fanatically; it is the ultimate symbol of dehumanization and death. Advertisers make use of this internalized stereotype to exploit the engendered in individuals who have embarked on the futile task of molding themselves into the narrow, stereotyped image. Women, who accept the 'Barbie-doll image of themselves, can be easily convinced to spend a lot of money on latest fashions.

The term 'stereotype' was initially used to refer to a printing stamp, which was used to make multiple copies from a single model or mould. The great journalist and commentator Walter Lippmann adopted the term in his 1922 book *Public Opinion* as a means of describing the way society set about categorizing people- stamping human beings with a set of characteristics as well. He identified four aspects of stereotypes, which are as follows: ^[1] they are simple. ^[2] They are acquired secondhand. ^[3] They are false and erroneous, as they are attempts to claim that each individual human being in a certain group shares a set of common qualities. As each individual is different from the other, stereotype is a logical impossibility. ^[4] They are resistant to change. From the feminist point of view, stereotyping is a major hindrance in the women's quest for self-identification and self-location.

It is necessary to know the term 'self for the discussion of problematic of self-location. The psychological definition of the term is based on the set of feelings and attitudes that people possess, and a certain sense of who they are. The term has two distinct sets of meanings. One set is related to people's attitude about themselves, their picture of the way they look, the

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impact they believe they have on others, and their perceived traits, abilities, eccentricities and weaknesses. This collection consists of 'self-image' or 'self-concept'. "Attitudes, feelings perception and evaluation of self are as an object. The second set of meanings relates to the 'executive functions'-processes by which the individual manages, copes, thinks, remembers, perceives and plans. The first set sees self as an object, the second as a process. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow experimented with people and formulated two theories. Rogers' Theory of self does not involve complex personality structures or stages of development. Rogers emphasized the whole of experience the phenomenal field. It is the individual's subjective frame of reference, not related to the external reality. He had realized that the self was an important element in the experiences of a person. In addition to the present self, there is also the ideal self that a person would like to be. Everyone strives to attain their concept of the ideal self, but a few achieve it.

Abraham Maslow believed that each person has an essential nature that presses to emerge, like the 'presses within an acorn to become an oak tree. In his view, we all have higher-level growth needs-such as the need for self-actualization and understanding of our selves — but these higher needs only assume a dominant role in our lives after our more primitive needs are satisfied. The growth needs make us distinctly human. The characters of the self as one experiences it, and on which the self-psychologists lay their emphasis are, first, its persistence or self-identity; second, its individuality or uniqueness; third, the fact that it is fundamental or basal to its experiences, and finally the fact that it is related its social and physical environment. The individuality or uniqueness of each self is the characteristic that distinguishes it from every other self. Both, the persistence and the individuality of the self imply the fact that it is basal to the specific, concrete experiences to the perceiving, imaginings and the emotions. The relatedness of the self to the objects making up its environment has been specially stressed by the 'social' and 'differential' psychologists like Ward, Mitchell Rehmke, and by 'functional' psychologists, notably Angell and Jung who admit a self.

Though the psychological definition does not differentiate between men and women, it was Simone de Beauvoir who, being acutely aware of gender discrimination, first questioned the status quo and provided answers of her own. In *The Second Sex* she writes, "Humanity is male and man defines woman as relative to him. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, and she is the other" (65). This category of the other is as primordial as consciousness itself, in her opinion. The duality is expressed in the most primitive societies and the most ancient mythologies. It is the duality of the self and the other. Originally this duality was not attached to the sexes, nor was it dependent upon any empirical facts. As Hegel states, in our consciousness there is a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness. The subject can be posed only in being opposed. It sets itself up as the essential, as opposed to the inessential, and the object. But the other consciousness, the other ego is another individual entity. It sets up a reciprocal chain. Nobody will voluntarily become the other or the object. But if the other is to stay as the other, not to regain the status of being the one,

he must be submissive enough to accept this point of view of another self. The question arises regarding the beginning point of the submission of women. Just as men are men by virtue of their anatomy and physiology, women are women. The otherness is natural, not incidental like other historical facts. It is absolute and beyond the possibility of a change. The reason is that, a condition brought about at a certain time can be changed at another time; not so in case of a natural condition. Secondly, woman fails to become the essential because she herself fails to bring about this change. The bond that unites her to her oppressor cannot be compared to any other. It is a basic trait of woman that she is the other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another. If he is the master, a bond of a reciprocal economic need unites her, the slave,-with him. The master does not make a point of his dependence because he can satisfy his need through his own action. The slave is acutely aware of her dependence. The two never shared the world in equality. If she declines to be the other, she must denounce all the advantages conferred upon her. If she remains a secondary entity, she gets economic protection and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. It is an easy road, but full of loss and ruin. She should manifest her complicity when the man makes her the other. She lacks resources, and she is often pleased with her role as the other.

Most societies have tried to regulate sexuality by placing it firmly within their marriage and kinship structure. However, in societies that evolved male dominated forms of family, marriage became an instrument of control over female sexuality. In the west, Engel preceded the feminists in critiquing the sexual morality inherent in such male-dominated family structures. He saw the destruction of the patriarchal family as a necessary step towards freeing women from men's control. Efforts to promote sexual liberation in the west were accompanied by a very high rate of breakdown of families and marriages. At the same time, subjective expectations of marriage became more and more exaggerated. Walking out of marriages, in search of more exciting liaisons is no longer, only a male prerogative. Women frequently exercise this option. However, even though the idea of lifelong sexual loyalty in marriage is no longer assumed in the west, the majority of believers in sexual liberation expect a new form of sexual commitment — serial monogamy. For whatever duration that a couple is together, the new morality assumes that they will refrain from sexual involvement with others.

The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance, practically she is completely insignificant; she pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history.

This is the ironical paradox of a woman's life. Men need her, love her, worship her, and write about her but they do so in relation to their own selves. The desires and aspects of a woman's life, which do not relate to them ordinarily, do not interest them. Women's writing struggling against internalization of role models thrust on women has learnt to express the untold narrative of being a woman. Woman's writing is important today, more than ever before. Literature is a cultural construct and provides us with valuable insights into the development of societies. It helps psychological understanding and reformulations of epistemological constructs. Women's writing focuses on both, the

manifestation of a female sensibility, a feminine reality, and on its significance as a means of bringing, about an awareness of this-reality. Gender, like other categories such as race and class, is a significant category of social and political reality. So far, women's writing has been dismissed as hardly of any consequence because religious and political thought had assigned them as beings less national and intellectual than the male of the species.

Freedom is perhaps the first requirement, for 'taboos' and inhibitions do not allow the pursuit of experience. Women have been kept in kitchens and parlors, in purdah and in luxury, but deprived freedom. The needs of society, child marriages, child bearing and child rearing were the causes that have kept women tied to their chains. Women's lives had been split into two-the physical and the intellectual- and the latter had been left underdeveloped by the artificial constructs of society. Romance thrived on this underdevelopment and romantic notions served to keep women happy, longing for their demon lover. Paradoxically, while on the one hand women were placed outside culture, outside history, outside time on the other they were treated as the custodians of culture, preserving it and continuing it through procreation, traditions, rituals and conservation. Surprisingly their own relationships and values were referred to as subculture even when families were extended, boundaries were crossed and kinship founded through them. In 1912, suffragettes in England exploded into militant action, breaking windows in London shops and even at the Prime Minister's home. Some 150 of them were arrested, including Emmeline Pankhurst, and in prison they continued their protest, refusing to eat driving the prison authorities to force-feed them. In many ways, the twentieth century can be called the age of women; all over the world their rights and wrongs, their wishes and desires, have been the subject of fierce and heated debates.

Receiving its impetus from the feminist movements, a process of self-discovery of a female tradition has been set into motion. It is a journey of questioning of the form of epistemological formulations and personal awareness. Feminist criticism originated in recognition of love for women writers, in an urge to reveal the diverse ways in which women have been oppressed, misinterpreted and trivialized by the dominant patriarchal tradition, and to show how these are reflected in the images of women in the works of male authors. These two initiating impulses lead to a variety of critical methods and even converge in several places. For instance, studies of the images of women in the works of female authors might also concentrate on the ways in which such images reveal women's oppression, or on how an author's own absorption of patriarchal values might cause her to create female characters that fulfill society's stereotypes of women. An enquiry into the works of women authors holds two related premises about gender. One is that the inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine Maudate, but a cultural construct, and therefore a proper subject of study for any humanistic discipline. The second is that a male perspective, assumed to be 'universal' has dominated fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods. A feminist perspective leads to a critique of our sex-gender system. The social construction of gender takes place through the workings of ideology. Ideology is that system of beliefs and assumptions unconscious, unexamined, invisible- which represents 'the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence' Elaine

Showalter has stated that it is necessary to treat minor women writers historically as well as critically. They should be placed in a theoretical framework that treats them as more than the flotsam of popular culture and be connected to each other and to female literary tradition.

The need for feminist literary criticism as expressed by her, is because in its earliest years feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic or popular male literature and the exclusion of women from literary history

Patricia Meyer Spacks was one of the first to group women writers systematically in the female literary tradition that Showalter recommended. In *The Female Imagination* (1975), she examined similarities of experience and response in writing by women throughout the centuries. She questioned the ways of female feelings, the modes of responding, that persisted despite social change, and whether any characteristic patterns of self-perception shaped the creative expressions of women. It is fact that, the act of writing is literature. It signifies making, moulding, engraving, creating - writing the body, writing the 'woman'

It is necessary to go beyond similarities of image, theme and structure, and to consider issues that link women's writing to specific socio cultural realities. It is a fact that women writing in different periods, different genres, women who were geographically, psychologically and historically far apart have shown distinctly similar traits in their writing. For Gilbert and Gubar, as for Showalter, there is no doubt that literature reflects life, and that experience is translated into literature. In their book *Mad Women in the Attic* Gilbert and Gubar propound a complex theory of women's creativity. The literary text is the space where writer and reader, narrator and narrate engage in dialogue, and where a specific literary piece enters into the literary system and inscribes itself into a network of intertextual relationships with other literary works. Where a discourse appeals directly to an image as a point of its argument or demonstration, one can be sure that all difference is being elided, that the unity of some accepted vision is being reproduced. We, it is not true that the picturing of experience is gender neutral. In order to disclose the arbitrariness of patriarchal hegemony, feminist critics engage in a dialogical opposition to traditional models and values. In this respect, a textual approach to literature guided by feminist concerns can be an effective political tool. When a textual reader ignores an author's presumed intentions, it is a serious act of insubordination for it puts into question the propriety of paternity. Although it may be impossible to escape the hegemony of patriarchal structures, nonetheless, by unveiling the prejudices at work in our cultural artifact, we impugn the universality of the man-made models provided to us, and allow for the possibility of sidestepping and subverting their power.

Every nation is a socio cultural ensemble, which has a symbolic denominator in the form of its ail, Philosophy and religious manifest. Such a denominator has a solidity rooted in a particular mode of reproduction. It is also echoed in the corresponding symbolic denominator of another socio cultural ensemble. This seems natural when the entities involved are linked by history. There are certain formations that summarize the dynamics of socio cultural organism. It is a question of groups being defined according to their place in production, but especially according to their role in the mode

of reproductions and its representation, which, while being the specific socio cultural traits of the formation in question, are diagonal to it and connect it to other socio cultural formations.

Feminism is a rich, complicated and often contradictory body of research, aimed at examining gender in society. It is generally believed that Charles Fourier who conceived of women's emancipation as the buttress of global social transformations invented the word feminism. A simple definition of feminism means a study of women not as objects but as subjects of knowledge. Abigail Adams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, George Sand, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, John Stuart Mill, Emma Goldman, Friedrich Engels, Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Henrik Ibsen, Margaret Sanger, Rosa Luxemburg, Mme. Curie, and Diderot among others contributed to the original history of feminist thought and theory. The attempt to include and account for women continues with Gloria Steinem, Bell Hooks, Bella Abzug and Naomi Woolf. Although Mills and Engels among others contributed to feminism, they have found fault with feminism in that it had yet to develop a viable theoretical framework. Academics such as, Heckman and Hartsock, Phillips, Gross, Moore, Tong, Whelehan and Oakcly have more recently contributed to developing more complex understanding of feminine/gender knowledge through epistemological development. One of the most valuable contributions of feminism is to deal with epistemology, ways of knowing, or the theory of knowledge, which has been discussed in detail in the later pages.

Donna Langston, in her *Changing our Power* (1978) has defined feminism. Feminist theory is a body of ideas which attempts to explain the status of women in society, how this status is originated, why it persists and what must be done to change this status.

This definition makes a good jumping point. The inequality regarding women persists even today, although in a very different form now than in generations before. Strong women in history-suffragists, civil rights workers, and feminists-have worked hard to get their status to the point it is right now, but young feminists are learning through theory that they have to pick up the torch and continue to strive toward improvement of their social status. A large part of modern feminist theory has to do with the last part of Langston's statement- "What must be done to change this status?". Simone de Beauvoir's question, "what is a woman?" has set the agenda for feminist theory for twenty years. It has pointed feminists towards an examination of the social, economic and linguistic structures that give meaning to the biological sex differences that have traditionally defined women. As they attempt to analyze these questions, feminist theorists take philosophical perspectives that result in complicated and often indistinctly defined political and theoretical divisions. These divisions often fall under such labels as liberal, radical, cultural, socialist, Anglo American, French and post structuralist feminism. Each of these theoretical stands falls somewhere along a continuum, on which gender is defined according to essentialist 'or constructivist paradigms. Women have always been seen as essential subject of discussion. From the beginning of the women's movement, women have felt compelled to redefine their history, biology, psychology, literature and epistemology as different from the circumscribed definition

that the masculine patriarchal tradition imposes leading to intellectual and sensual strategies.

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