

*In the Name of God*  
*The Most Compassionate, The Most Merciful*

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OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN  
IN  
*FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS* AND *MISS JULIE*  
A FEMINIST-PSYCHOANALYTIC READING

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*To my dearest mother and father*

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## *Introduction*

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We sometimes say 'the sex' to designate woman; she is the flesh, its delights and dangers... Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

The systematic questioning of images of women in male-authored texts, as the first phase of modern feminist criticism, began by the classic work of Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949). The issue was again addressed in late 1960s by such influential writers as Mary Ellmann and Kate Millett, resulting in a widespread rereading of male writers. However, after a period of fascination with "Images of Women" approach some women scholars began to cast doubt on the usefulness of this branch of feminist criticism and tried to wave it aside as outdated.

One of the most formidable of these scholars, Elaine Showalter, coins the general term "feminist critique" to refer to the study of "the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems" (309). Characterizing it as "ideological" and "concerned with the feminist as *reader*" (as opposed to her favored, supposedly non-ideological study of women *writers*, "gynocritics"), Showalter dismisses the "feminist critique" as "redressing a grievance" which in effect "keeps us dependent upon [male critical theory] and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems" (310). Although Showalter's concerns about, to use Toril Moi's words, "the wholesale lack of theoretical (or even literary) awareness of these early feminist critics" (48) are well grounded, and have been voiced by many other feminists at that, it appears that in her zeal to establish a monolithic theoretical ground for feminist criticism, she fails to see that the reproduction, both in life and literature, of stereotypical sex roles has



always been the main means of exercising and justifying male dominance over women and that literature, by definition, can function effectively as an apparatus whereby the gendered subjects<sup>1</sup> rediscover themselves in, and identify with, those subject positions into which they have once been socialized—the very positions, that is, feminism, in all its many forms, has always regarded as oppressive and sought to dismantle. (We will soon return to this important discussion.)

Nevertheless, not all feminists are sympathetic to the kind of critique leveled by Showalter against the "Images of Women" approach. Many feminists, in other words, can see no reason why we cannot have a basic theoretical model for our reading. "If it is possible," writes Patrocinio P. Schweickart, "to formulate a basic conceptual framework for disclosing the 'difference' of women's writing, surely it is no less possible to do so for women's reading" (427). In the continuation of her discussion, Schweickart goes further and puts into question the fundamental distinction between "feminist critique" and "gynocritics" on the grounds that the latter is also essentially a mode of *criticism* (i.e. a mode of *reading*). "Thus," she concludes,

the relevant distinction is not between woman as reader and woman as writer, but between feminist readings of male texts and feminist readings of female texts, and there is no reason why the former could not be as theoretically coherent (or irreducibly pluralistic) as the latter. (427)

According to post-structuralist feminists, however, the orientation toward the study of (female) writers and their "works" in the feminist criticism represented by Showalter must be taken more seriously as it marks a breach of the stated political

aims of feminist criticism. Showalter's obsession, they would contend, with "the psychodynamics of female creativity" (Showalter 311) and the authentic experience of women writers has its origins in the patriarchal humanist conception of the writer as the text's point of origin—as that autonomous individual who precedes and exceeds the literary "work" he (or sometimes she) creates. As Roland Barthes puts it in his formulation of the workings of the classic text, in this view the writer (or author, to use his preferred word) "is always supposed to go from signified to signifier, from content to form, from idea to text, from passion to expression" (qtd. in Silverman 243); the critic's direction, however, is the other way round: he "works back from signifiers to signified." Such position has had serious consequences for literary criticism as it posits that writing is an immutable *medium* used by the writer to *transmit* his distinguished experience—to *express* his single, transcendental meaning; therefore (and not surprisingly), the critic's duty is simply to discover this fixed and final meaning and value it as the product of a unique, artistic sensibility. As Toril Moi puts it, the critic's (or reader's) task is to "listen respectfully to the voice of the [great] author" in order to hear his valuable, "representative" experience, the continued transmission of which will be happily ensured through the male-constructed canon of "great literature" (77). Moi goes on critically to describe what she regards as a complicity between the Showalterian version of feminism and such male humanist hierarchism:

[While] Anglo-American feminist criticism has waged war on this self-sufficient canonization of middle-class male values... [it has] rarely challenged the very notion of such a canon. Showalter's aim,

in effect, is to create a separate canon of women's writing, not to abolish all canons.

As a result of this new hierarchy of legitimate ideas and values, the feminist critic/reader too is supposed to listen respectfully to the authorial voice (this time to that of the female writer, of course) rather than challenge it when necessary—and in so doing, she looks to the same oppressive structure for undoing the patriarchal dominance that has given rise to the existing hierarchical oppositions (such as the author/reader opposition or the fundamental, phallogentric<sup>2</sup> opposition between male and female).

The problem with Showalterian variety of feminist criticism, the argument would go, as with any other humanist approach to literature, lies in its total disregard of the essentially linguistic and hence cultural condition of literary texts. When I use the term "literary text," it must be kept in mind, I use it in preference to "literary work" which, in Barthes' terminology<sup>3</sup>, designates the traditional, humanist understanding of the literary writing as the transcript of the author's thoughts, feelings, intentions, etc., and the inadequacy of which (in this sense) I have tried to show by quotation marks of protest. What is particularly important about literary "work" is its relation to the author, which, as Jonathan Culler and others have rightly noted<sup>4</sup>, might be understood in terms of the anxious struggles of the patriarchal system in the face of the uncertainty of father's tie to the child: a set of "cultural inventions" come to affirm the paternal relation of the author to the "work"—even if the author is female: "any maternal functions deemed valuable would be assimilated to paternity," writes Culler, drawing our attention, for one example, to "the sexual connotations of authorship and authority" in Harold Bloom's paradigm of literary

creation (60)<sup>5</sup>—which is comparable to the "cultural invention" of giving the father's name to the child; and then the "work" is rigorously watched over in order to control its possible "intercourse with texts so as to prevent the proliferation of illegitimate interpretations" and meanings, i.e. meanings that are not "truly the author's own progeny" (Culler 60-1). But in the wake of the post-structuralist proclamation of the author's "death," we can no longer think of the literary writing as the author's progeny; nor can we think of the presumed authorial thoughts, intentions, feelings, and experience, in general, as the ground of its meaning, for even these are, in the last resort, derived from the cultural significations preceding them:

Did [the writer] wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely... [He] no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing... (Barthes, "The Death of..." 149)

Accordingly, to speak of the literary writing as *text* is to conceive it as a tissue of signs and citations, to use Barthes' much employed "textile metaphor" ("Textual Analysis..." 170), all drawn from a shared cultural repertoire or "dictionary," and thus as an intertextual space. It is also to conceive it as a signifying process—rather than a stable, empirical object—which, like language itself, can be realized and meaningful only through the human subject who interacts with it—i.e. the reading subject. As Barthes points out, "the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse... *the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*" ("From

Work..."). Thus in reading the *text* from a feminist perspective, we are not concerned with the "authentic" experience of the writer (for now we know that s/he is just a cultural *subject* whose experience, subjectivity and/or gender identity is constructed by and in relation to the dominant discourse (see below, Chapter One)—even if that relation is a complex one of compliance and defiance, "incorporation" and "resistance"<sup>6</sup>), but rather with the text as experienced by the feminist reader—and this renders irrelevant the question of the writer's biological sex (Furman 69). Differently put, since for the feminist textual reader "woman" is not an essence or an ontological given but a discursive construct, she is well aware of the fact that women writers too are quite liable to speak the values of the dominant phallogocentric discourse; then, she would legitimately ask, given feminism's announced project of changing the status quo, what is the point of revering *all* female-authored texts?

But there arises a problem; one might argue that the emphasis in feminist textual reading on the reader's experience returns us to the point we started from: once again the individual experience is privileged. However, it must be noted that we do not cast off the privileged personal experience of the author (an experience whose universality and neutrality the phallogocentric criticism takes for granted) only to restore it in the form of the positive, female experience of the "person" of the feminist reader, against which the truth, value or authenticity of a text is to be measured (as was the case in the early phases of "Images of Women" criticism). In fact, what we told about the discursive condition of writer's experience pertains directly to that of the reading subject. To put the matter more clearly, we regard the feminist reader's experience (or more exactly, all experience) as *textual*—i.e. as constructed by and in a variety of textual systems, one of which being the textual system of feminism—and, therefore, as the product of differential relations between the signs, and between the

texts rather than a stable, self-present, positively defined, and thus metaphysically privileged entity; the feminist reader's experience is important only insofar as it opens up new possibilities of conceiving the texts by exposing the heterogeneity of meanings which have been all harnessed to the interests of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

Now, the insistence in feminist textual reading on the discursive character of experience and of reading and writing activities, I would contend, might be considered as a restatement of the thrust of feminist criticism from its earliest moments to date: that *all literary-critical discourse is political* (even if not expressly or self-consciously so) and, therefore, what seems to be neutral, innocent and natural in any such discourse is in fact ideologically/politically encoded. Crucially though, feminists have been at pains to show, this fact has been historically obscured under the very guise of neutrality and naturalness. Using this guise, Judith Fetterley persuasively argues, the male literary tradition has been successful in procuring the female reader's assent to, and complicity in, the reinscription of cultural assumptions which only oppress and marginalize her:

[The classic works of fiction] constitute a series of designs on the female reader, all the more potent in their effect because they are "impalpable." One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or

at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative. (xi)

Importantly, the male critical tradition has reinforced this "posture of the apolitical" by propagating an intentional mode of reading which, as we have already noted, aims at discovering the truthful, representative and universally respected meanings of the distinguished creative sensibility—the author. As Barthes puts the idea, in this tradition "the *author* is a god (his place of origin is the signified); as for the critic, he is the priest whose task is to decipher the Writing of the god" (qtd. in Silverman 244).

But the feminist critic is no priest. At this point it is vital to remember that feminist criticism developed out of, and derived its impetus directly from, women's social and political struggles for attaining equal rights and for effecting a fundamental change in the dominant sexist culture. We know that in order to meet these objectives, the feminist movement has set itself the important task of awakening women to their rights and interests. Given its essentially, and outspokenly, political character, it is no wonder that feminist literary theory has extended these same objectives to the field of literature, putting the task of consciousness-raising at the top of the agenda. The idea is that, *ideally*, a raised consciousness would enable the female reader to enter a productive dialogue with the texts she would otherwise passively consume, and, in doing so, to resist the terms of her own oppression.

In speaking of resisting textual oppression, we are inevitably led to the issue of stereotypical representations of sexual difference in literary texts, because stereotyping has been acknowledged to be one major form of "psychological oppression" (Bartky 23)<sup>7</sup>. Now, what strategy should we develop for resisting this mode of oppression? In order to answer this question, first we need to make clear our

position on the category "representation." One position demands that we regard literature as an art that, at its best, truly represents or reflects the realities we daily encounter. The feminist critics who hold (or rather, *held*) this reflectionist view of literature object to those male-produced texts which fail *faithfully* to represent the *real* conditions of women's (and men's) lives, accusing the writers of such texts of a mischievous attempt to offer a distorted picture of women, and of social realities in general (and it is in this context that the feminist obsession with *misrepresentation* of women in literature is to be understood). This kind of feminist resistance to stereotypical representations (originally developed by "Image" critics) is reminiscent, or part, of the critical tradition which makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the literary texts that are true to life and are thus to be commended as "good" or "great" literature, and, on the other hand, the texts which represent things in a false, unreal manner and are dismissed as "bad." But there is something wrong with such position; as some feminists were quick to recognize, to criticize a writer for his infidelity to reality implies that there is a pre-existing, neutral reality out there, to which that writer has failed to have full access owing to defectiveness of his perception, to ill will or whatever. But if we accept the cultural critics' proposition that even our realities are the product of the language we speak and, by implication, of our culture, we can no longer consider them to be natural, innocent and value-free. So, the question arises, considering our ultimate goal of reworking the dominant cultural assumptions, can we gain much from a feminist practice which has difficulty telling the natural from the cultural?

Yet there is another position, taken by post-structuralists and semioticians who regard literary representation as a system of signs. Dudley Andrew describes the



position of these modernists on cinematic representation (which may well be transposed to literary representation) in following terms:

[They] treat [representation] as a special and limited case of signification. To them cinematic discourse, like any discourse, proceeds by the articulations of codes<sup>8</sup> producing a myriad of meaning effects. One of these effects is representation, which...is a fully ideological effect whereby a picture of reality arises out of the interplay of differential signs. (53)

Considering what has been told so far, we hardly need to point out that literary representation, viewed as a signifying practice, exists thanks to the reading subject who makes sense of it. So if a certain representation calls up "a picture of reality," it can do so only through the cultural subject who has a natural urge to provide links between that representation and the realities of his/her culture. As we will see in the chapters that follow, this urge is particularly reinforced, and at the same time satisfied, in the process of reading classic/realist texts, which have developed a variety of strategies for delimiting, suppressing and channeling of their potential meanings in accordance with cultural and ideological requirements. Importantly, it is this *realist* "castrating" control of meaning that modernist feminists have tried to resist—and this puts a critical distance between the attitude of "Image" critics and that of modernist feminists toward the question of stereotypical representations; that is to say, where the former resist such representations for their being "unrealistic," the latter maintain that, more often than not, these representations are very much in accord with the realities of the dominant patriarchal culture and, to them, this is exactly what causes problems,

because each *representation* of a reality amounts to the reinscription and reproduction of the ideology which informs that reality. And it is important for our discussion that this reproduction of ideology is effected only when the reading subject accedes to the familiar subject position defined for her/him by the text—that is, when s/he *identifies* with that position.

Freud defines identification as "the assimilation of one ego to another one...as a result of which the first ego behaves like the second in certain respects, imitates it and in a sense takes it up into itself" (qtd. in Grinberg 17). After Freud, the concept of identification has been variously and controversially defined and interpreted by different theorists, who, nevertheless, all agree that it is a mainly unconscious mechanism which plays the central role in the construction of subjectivity as it constantly modifies and structures the ego<sup>9</sup>. As regards the process of identification with fictive characters in narrative texts, I do not intend, at this early stage, to go into details of this issue, for at least one of the predominant forms of this process will be explored rather rigorously in subsequent chapters. Yet, since in this dissertation we are dealing with texts that assume a male reader and, therefore, we will be concerned almost exclusively with the dynamics of male identification, I suppose the dynamics of the female subject's identification in the process of reading these same texts warrants some clarification here.

The point has been made that the male and female readers are placed in the illusionistic world of the narrative through their identification with respectively male and female characters. As we will see in the first chapter, the male reader's identification with strong male figures holds out the promise of power and authority for him and thus, one might assume, is partly explicable in terms of self-serving purposes. But if feminists are right in claiming that sexist texts represent women as

weak, passive, objectified and inferior to men, how can we explain the female reader's identification with the female characters of these texts? Is such identification a pleasurable experience for the female reader? If no, how can the text continue to appeal to her? And if yes, how can it be so?

Schweickart has tried to provide us with an answer to the third of these questions. Drawing on a Fredric Jameson thesis, that "The effectively ideological is also at the same time necessarily utopian" (qtd. in Schweickart 431), she contends that it is the utopian content of certain sexist texts that appeals to the female reader by rousing her utopian desires, which are, ironically, used against her in those very texts. Though to some extent true, this contention leaves one major problem unresolved: after all, there are times when the very sexist assumption which has informed the text appeals to the female reader—and this holds particularly true in the case of "sexual objectification" of female characters.

According to the philosopher Sandra Bartky,

A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her. (26)

Bartky regards sexual objectification as another form of psychological (i.e. internalized) oppression, which can help explain why far from being unwelcome, it is an experience that many women find natural, if not exciting. I suppose my point has become clear by now: the internalized character of sexual objectification, together with the unconscious quality of identification, leaves no doubt that we have to have

recourse to psychoanalysis if we really want to know the reason why many sexist texts hold considerable appeal not only for male but also for female readers or why while women typically identify with objectified female characters, men identify with those male characters who are able to wield power and control.

As we will see in Chapter One, according to Freud, the first experience of identification, which, importantly, forms the basis for all later identifications, is not identical for male and female subjects: whereas the male child identifies with his father in order to achieve the mythical power (the "phallus," in symbolic terms) that he admires in the father, the female child is forced to identify with her mother (i.e. when she finds that, culturally, she cannot obtain such power) so as to become the *object* of her father's desire and, consequently, to have indirect access to the power she cannot achieve. So we see that from the beginning the male subject is defined, and his desire is structured, in terms of what he has, and is assigned the status of subject; by contrast, the female subject is defined in terms of what she lacks, is given the place of object, and her desire is structured accordingly. In other words, the first experience of identification in the phallogocentric order results in a positioning of the male subject as the dominant, active principle, and of the female subject as the subordinate, passive element—and, typically, this pattern, in both its eroticized and non-eroticized forms, is continually confirmed by the subject's later identifications.

The brand of feminist criticism known as the "Images of Women" approach was in the main concerned with a sociological analysis of women's oppression as reflected in literature and other artistic forms. A typical text in this critical discourse, say Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), would examine in detail the content of excerpts from "misogynist literature," and then would continue with a thoroughgoing analysis of