

## Men as Victims in Feminist Literature: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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### Abstract

The paper discusses representation of men in Margaret Atwood's *The Surfacing* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* on a comparative basis in order to understand how men are represented in feminist literature. How is their representation different from how they are represented in other forms of literature? In the *Surfacing* the unnamed character is exploited by the major character of the novel and on a similar line the heroine of the novel *The Awakening* seduces her friend despite having a loving husband and exploits him for he was the person who was readily available. A thorough examination of both the novels brings out the idea that men have been reduce to the miseries. In *surfacing* he is avenged upon but in *The Awakening* the revenge is not the motive but it is the heroine's suppressed desire to have freedom from the bondage of marriage and she wants to do what was just impossible in the institution of marriage.

### Introduction

The purpose of the study is to analyze feminist literature about the identity of men by asserting the identity of women, with the help of critical theoretical perspective. How does this assertion of identity by women affect the representation of men in the literature? The study will be focused on the feminist literature written by mainstream writers and postcolonial writers and to see the parallelism and relationship between them. Are men are reflected or presented as real men or

they are puppets in the hands of feminist? Are their actual qualities as human beings are attributed to them or they are more sinned against than sinning? As every individual has multidimensional identities, most of them are neglected and under-specifications or over-specifications of men are represented in the feminist literature. Through literature social identity including national, ethnic, religious identities is formed. Here we have to discuss cultural identity and hence the representation of men in feminist literature. The literature which is written by men has different dimensions from the literature written by women. The male feminists have the view that women are jealous of each other whereas female feminists are emphasizing that women get consoled by female relationships only.

### **Background**

Feminist criticism was not in existence until late in the 1960s. The emergence of it lies in the struggle for the recognition of the roles of women and their social and political rights. This struggle has been reflected in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Virginia Woolf has been a great precursor of the criticism as she in her *A Room of One's Own* and other critical essays criticized what she calls 'Patriarchal Society' which prevents women from realizing their roles having productive and creative qualities.

The same movement was started in America by Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) and by Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. The first one talks about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature and the other talks about the relationships of power in society leading to dominance of men and subordination of women. Kale Millet also attacks Freud's Psychoanalytic theory. She further analyses extracts from the writers like D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet to show the degradation of women through the agency of men. From the

practice of all the feminist authors it becomes clear that feminist criticism is not a unitary theory, it depends on how you use it. These feminist have also used various theories including Psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, Standpoint, Social constructivism and other poststructuralist theories to analyze the literature to assert their identity. Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* introduced the second wave feminist concept of "male gaze" to discuss gender asymmetry in film. According to her heterosexual men are in the control of camera in film.

These are the assumptions behind feminist literature:

1. the western civilization is patriarchal which is realized in such a way as to subordinate women and they are also taught to follow the rules of patriarchy for their own subordination and subjugation.
2. Sex is 'biological' whereas gender is a cultural construct. According to Simone de Beauvoir 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...'
3. This patriarchal ideology is also existing in the great works of literature (so called) which are until recently were written by the men for men. Through this it is being used in the literature therefore the whole literature is to be re-written.

Earlier Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak have worked on the critical discourse analysis but their analysis was about how to exercise the power by language and Discourse Historical Approach in critical discourse analysis. Fairclough was one of the founders of critical discourse analysis in sociolinguistics. In *Language and Power* he talks about the replacement between language and social institution practices. He developed the concept of synthetic personalization to accommodate linguistic effects. Whereas Ruth Wodak has conducted research on discourse

studies and critical discourse analysis and she also talks about change in discursive practices over time and in many genres. Therefore my area of focus will be quite different from them.

### **Identity and Representation of men in *The Surfacing* and *The Awakening***

Then, we can estimate the effects of such assumptions on the image and character of men in this literature. This will be interesting to look deeper into this. Since this has been practiced differently by mainstream feminist authors and post-colonial feminist authors, it has wider scope to see the relationships between the two. In such texts men are not visible as characters but their influence is wide and strong enough to subjugate women. This is an indication that these writers are concerned about the assertion of the identity of woman. For example, in Margret Atwood's *Surfacing* where main character (who remains nameless) and narrator of the story is unnamed to make her experiences representative of general reality. Such kind of strategies leads to the emergence of men as negative characters in toto. The unnamed narrator had been duped by a man and she takes her revenge on other man. This indicates how the mistake of a man creates such an environment that all other men are considered alike. In this novel, Joe is unable to understand the complexities of life of the heroine; hence he is shown to be insensitive to the happenings of life going around him where as David is shown to be makeup loving husband. Her ex-lover is shown to be her husband i.e. 'fake husband' who is shown to be responsible for the abortion although it was her mistake that she could not understand his status. In addition to it, Peter is presented as a predator in *The Edible Woman*.

In *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing is said to be 'making jokes' about men, which gave her title like 'men hater' and 'balls breaker' although its reception was different at different places. Here, the family and home are shown to be occupied by women and men are shown unconcerned about their families and homes and are interested in money, power etc. In *Herland*,

Charlotte Perkins Gilman takes three men characters to highlight the inequality between men and women. these three men are presented according to the convenience of the author so that equality of man and woman is realized as ideal condition. But this is created on the cost of making men as good or bad to serve the purpose.

Joanna Russ shows in her novel *The Female Man* that there is no simple solution of the problems of gender, but she lets her readers explore it through her story. She, “instead of laying the blame of female subjugation and meekness solely at men's feet, points out that women themselves are just as responsible”. Whereas in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Female relationships are shown so strong so that they can narrate their stories of oppression and subjection. Celie instigates Harpo to beat Sofia as she was jealous of her physical and mental strength. This shows that woman is projected against the woman. How is Harpo responsible for that? This is a big question. Alphonso whom Celie thinks of her father turns out to be her stepfather. In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ai feels massive cultural shock as he explores the androgynous world whereas in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna is not happy with her husband but is happy with Robert and she also pursues an affair with Arobin but never gets attached to him emotionally. Leaving her husband and children both Edna goes to Robert by being independent but ultimately in frustration returns back to her husband but she never finds him again. Here what kind of identity of husband is subverted or dismantled?

### **Conclusion**

On a comparative scale it is imperative to say that both the novels are written on different themes but the fundamental idea related to men appears to be same. This is clear from the understanding of both the novels the women used men for different reasons. In *Surfacing* the motive of revenge has been discussed with reference to men where men are said to be the perpetrators of the crime

and hence, they are supposed to be avenged upon whereas in case of *The Awakening* there is no revenge motive. The issue of romantic relationship between the married heroine and the unmarried hero is an excellent example where men are again subjected to as a utility device. In this case the idea is that the heroine picks up the husband at the cost of her lover. In *Surfacing* the man who was used by the heroine is denounced for the actions of someone else but coming from the masculine side but in *The Awakening* the lover is misused as the heroine has no courage to choose her lover over her husband. Hence, it could be concluded that in both the novels men has been portrayed as victims and that is the need of the novels to showcase the contemporary reality existing in the society.

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