

The Need for Fantasy as Dialogic Space in the Postmodern Feminist British Novel²

Anita Lashkarian, Ph.D

Dept. of English Yazd Univ.

E.mail anitalashkarian @ Yahoo.com

Abstract

The vital impact of feminism on philosophy, literature and criticism began to be acknowledged particularly, in the works of British women novelists of the sixties. The reaction was to the masculine ego-centric texts of the male mainstream writers. British postmodern feminist writers were, thus, impelled to seek a productive space for experimental forms of discourse. They attempted to propose and practice a radically different mode of communication with genuinely new alternatives from realism to fantasy. The present essay traces the British women novelists of the sixties and the forms of writing that they have formed. These writings allow a substantive remodeling of the female consciousness, fighting against fixity of forms to rebuilding new possibilities in feminist discourse.

Key Words:

Feminist discourse, Postmodernism, Fantasy, Female consciousness.



The Need for Fantasy as Dialogic Space in the Postmodern Feminist British Novel

Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world; it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new', absolutely 'other' and different.¹

There was perhaps the realization on the part of the novelist of the sixties, that neither the overly self-obsessed narratives of High Modernism, nor the distanced and unworldly space-age romances proliferating in the market, were suitable spaces for engaging with the harsher realities and politics of the times. The narrative qualities and effects of either kind of writing seemed to somehow disallow a discursive disruption of the world- which was the felt need of the hour- and ended in either the construction of self-enclosed texts around oneself as in the former, or the creation of alternative worlds intact in themselves as in the latter. The need to deal with the more pressing issues of the times, while simultaneously grounding one's body in the text, specially by women writers, required a form which could bring together the two.

Though 'fantasy' as a theme or genre, in British literature at least, has always found a sufficient space and a large readership, the more self-conscious forms of postmodern fantastic writing have only come of age since the sixties. While the novels of Tolkien and Lewis had fulfilled the masculine needs through the fantasy writings of those writers within the restrained rubric of Modernism, postmodernism demands from its women writers more self-reflexive and conscious- albeit more contrived- narratives. The traditional centrality of the masculine character had easily taken on the 'self' of the Modern text : the self as the unified subject, the central ego, well in command of the phenomenological world around it. Speaking of Tolkien and Lewis, of mass cultural representations, of Yeats, Hemingway, etc., Peter Middleton writes: "For the men there is a kind of all or nothing quality to it, either complete rational clarity or dark unconscious groping"². Thus, for better or worse, the masculine ego either created the world around it, or



had the world converging on it; in either case it formulated the masculine ego-centric text.

By the sixties the woman writer in Britain could see clearly that for a feminist discourse such a subjectivist writing would necessarily remain entrapped in the traditional male-dominated structures. In their attempts at freeing the subject(s)- and thus the dependent objects(s)- writers like Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes³ had begun to androgynize their subjects and neutralize their language in their Modern novels. Though this focused on the gendered character of sexuality and language they were unable at some level to delve completely into postmodern concerns. Much of society, and especially the vast sweep of history, seemed to lie outside their novels. The post-Stein generation of women writers saw things differently. They were concerned as much with issues surrounding them, as with issues of language and discourse, with gender as much as with sexuality. Speaking generally of women's writing of the last few decades, Felski (1981) says, "On the one hand it is autobiographical, exploring women's changing perceptions of self; on the other, this examination of subjectivity acquires a representative significance through the superimposition of a trans-subjective pattern of meaning, a narrative of emancipation derived from the political ideology of feminism"⁴. Thus, more overt ideological concerns needed to be brought in along with those of language and structure.

Doris Lessing in her ground breaking novel, *The Golden Notebook*, first published in 1962, dealt with issues of class, nationality, sex, gender, realism and fantasy, and seemed to represent what Middleton calls a "proleptic postmodernism"⁵. The female writing subject is foregrounded through the character of Anna Wulf. Saul Green stands in for the male, here an American filmmaker. Though Lessing is able to divide within the lengthy novel the 'emotional' world of women and the 'rational' world of men, Anna remains in her physical person a sexual object to Saul's male gaze. Eventually Anna is able to gain selfhood not in her physical person but only through her writings and polemical engagements with the larger issues of the world. In the presence of men she remains somehow the 'gazed at'.

The seeds of an early postmodernism can certainly be seen in this brilliant novel, as can be heard the great voice of prophecy announcing a



changing feminism. Lessing says in the introduction to the novel "I write all these remarks with exactly the same feeling as if I were writing a letter to post into the distant past: I am so sure that everything we now take for granted is going to be utterly swept away in the next decade"⁶. Writing in the eighties and nineties, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson do feel the need not only to have their women protagonists escape the 'gaze', simply stand outside of it, but to break down the gaze itself, so as to free the narrative from the hide and seek games it inevitably ends up playing with the master discourse. The final limits of novels like *The Golden Notebook* have to be transcended. Anna Wulf is limited not only by the world which surrounds her, but also perhaps by gender itself. Interestingly Lessing too, like the younger writers, felt the need to experiment with other forms like science fiction as in her mammoth *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-85), and near fantasy like *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975).

Yet it is fantasy writing alone which seeks to provide the space which Carter and Winterson seek. They need to break down the socially constructed world of 'spectacle', of nebulous and multifarious genders and genderizations, a world of transformations and mutants, where there are no preconceiveds. Such worlds are required to deconstruct the givens of Capitalism. Carter's 'female' protagonists progress chronologically through the novels into greater mutations' into textually contrived embodiments of different parts wherein each piece of the body can be removed, changed, dropped at will, or new aspects taken on. In these characters are found many of the preceding characters of mythology and literature, from Leda and Cleopatra to the present Queen of England. They also have aspects of maleness and masculinity. This does not allow any sort of gaze to pin down the person. Drawing attention to Fevvers, perhaps the most developed and mutant of Carter's characters, in her later novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Linda Hutcheon writes-

The novel's parodic echoes of *Pericles*, *Hamlet*, and *Gulliver's Travels* all function as do those of Yeats' poetry when describing a whorehouse full of bizarre women as "this lumber room of femininity, this rag-and-bone shop of the heart", they are all ironic feminizations of traditional or canonical male representations of the so-called generic



human-Man. This is the kind of politics of representation that parody calls to our attention⁷.

If Fevvers is Carter's Anna Wulf, then Saul Green is played by Walser, the young American journalist. Walser is unable to pin down Fevvers because of her over-constructedness. He can only describe the opening of her performance as "kitsch". Fevvers lives the question, as her slogan says, "Is she fact or is she fiction?" In fact, Walser finds himself falling a victim to her gaze every time he attempts to visually comprehend her.

The 'neutralization' of gender helps remove the preconceived, the "spectacle" as Russso 1994 calls it. Speaking of the 'spectacle', Russso says that it is "in this sense ... not an immaterial world apart, but rather the condition, divided, and producing division, of late capitalism...."⁸ In *Sexing the chery* (1989), Winterson writes "Notional life is the life encouraged by governments, mass education and the mass media. Each of those powerful agencies couples governments, mass education and the mass media. Each of those powerful agencies couples an assumption of its own importance with a disregard for individuality"⁹.

At the same time one cannot help realizing that continuing in the Stein tradition, many of these novels are deeply autobiographical, almost a genre in themselves-'autobiographical fantasies'. Giving up the realism of the earlier ages, these writers try to relativize social reality through subjective filters. In Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, one of the protagonists, perhaps male, perhaps androgynous, writes-

I began to walk with my hands stretched out in front of me, as do those troubled in sleep, and in this way, for the first time, I traced the lineaments of my own face opposite me.(9)

Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?(40).

Judith Ryan (1980) writes of such feminist novels, that "perception loses itself by degrees from its personal anchoring and becomes increasingly disembodied... subjectivity is dissolved, and the 'world' and 'self' are reduced to a associated bundle of elements."¹⁰ To this, Felski adds "Another and equally significant reaction is the retreat into the self; an existential concept of the subject as sole guarantor of meaning leads to a



pursuit of authenticity through self-analysis.”¹¹. Such a personalized authority can here alone impose “transsubjective patterns” upon the surrounding world(s) , and such ‘selves’ and worlds can, for these concerns, be best depicted in and through fantasy. Sappho in *Art & Lies* cries out “What are the unreal things but the passions that once burned one like a fire? What are the incredible things that one has faithfully believed ? What are the improbable things but the things that one has done oneself?”¹².

Writers like Winterson are well aware of the future of their kind of writing- the need for open spaces which are free from any restraining traditions or limits. They are, thus, able to enclose in their pages not just stories, but historic and immediate realities. Winterson (1997) says at the end of *Art Objects*:

The true writer will have to build up her readership from among those who still want to read and who want more than the glories of the past nicely reproduced. I have been able to build a readership. Largely through a young, student population, who want my books on their courses and by their beds. Reading is sexy.

They know it is. They know that there is such a thing as art and that it is not interchangeable with the word ‘entertainment... Judge the work not the writer seems to be what a new generation is prepared to do . It is for a new generation that I write (192).

Notes:

- 1- Jackson, Rosemary. 1981. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London and New York: Routledge.8.
- 2- Middleton, Peter.1992. *The Inward Gaze – Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*. London and New York :Routledge, 48.
- 3- Though Barnes and Stein are American writers, I have chosen to include them here as precursors of the later British writers because of their attempts at similar writing. Winterson’s own admiration for Stein, yet her need to go beyond Stein’s themes are clearly stated in an essay by her. Winterson writes, “ ... although Stein is not close to the genius of Woolf, the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is an act of terrorism against worn-out assumptions of what literature is and what form its forms take .

Modernism fights against fixity of form, not to invite an easy chaos but to rebuild new possibilities". ["Testimony Against Gertrude Stein" in *Art (Objects)*. New York: Knopf, 1996. 50]

- 4- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics.*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1981.
- 5- Middleton, Peter ____, 113
- 6- Lessing, Doris. 1962. *The Golden Notebook* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962, X111.
- 7- Hutcheon, Linda. 1983. *The Politics of Postmodernism.* London and New York: Routledge. 98.
- 8- Russo, Mary. 1994. *The Female Grotesque.* London and New York: Routledge. 161.
- 9- Winterson, Jeanette. 1989. *Sexing The Cherry.* London: Vintage. 134..
- 10- Ryan, Judith 1980. "The Vanishing Subject; Empirical Psychology and the Modern Novel". *PMLA*. 95: 857-869.
- 11- Felski, Rita ____ 81.
- 12- Winterson, Jeanette. 1995. *Art & Lies.* London :Vintage ,205.



References:

- Beaugrande, Robert. de 1988. "In Search of Feminist Discourse: The Difficult Case of Luce Irigaray". *College English*. 50(3):253-272.
- Bloom, Harold (Ed) 1999. *British Women Fiction Writers 1900-1960* Vol. One. Philadelphia: Chelsea House.
- Mezei, Kathy. (Ed.) 1996. *The Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers.* N. Carolina: N. Carolina Univ. Press.
- Todd, Anthea. 1999. *Women Writing In English: Britian, 1900-45.* London: Longman.
- Winterson, Jeanette 1994. *Art object.* New York: Knopf. 192.