

The Evolution of Female Writers: An Exploration of Their Issues and Concerns from the 19th Century to Today

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By the 19th century, “reform was an extremely influential aspect of journalism and urban life” (Lauter 2463), thus, women began to take larger roles in society and project their voices through their writings. Women writers have been subject to cruel and degrading remarks for centuries, even before Anne Bradstreet responded to the male suggestion that women are more suitable holding a “needle” than a “pen” (Lauter 439). Two centuries later, Nathaniel Hawthorne stated in his work *Mrs. Hutchinson* (1830): “The hastiest glance may show, how much of the texture and body of cisatlantic literature is the work of those slender fingers, from which only a light and fanciful embroidery has heretofore been required” (Lauter 2676). He suggests there was little to no change in the status of women writers since the 17th century. Sarah Willis Parton (Fanny Fern), through *Hints to Young Housewives* (1852) and *Independence* (1859), powerfully exerted her issues regarding gender inequality and freedom for women, (Lauter 2462) and through *Critics* (1854) and *Male Criticism on Ladies Books* (1857), she directly addresses the unjust and negative criticism that women writers received from male authors during her time (Lauter 2468). Women writers, such as Harriet Jacobs, often doubted themselves to express their struggles, subsequently forcing them to live in fear of their writing careers. Although women writers have gained more respect and acknowledgement since the 19th century, they still experience hardship against the disrespect they receive from male writers, readers, and critics.

Modern women writers face the challenge of being unaccepted in the literary world, often having to prove the worthiness and importance of their works, being categorized in ways different to men, and still have been subject to unethical remarks. Such struggles not only reside in women writers in America, but also in China and Greece, where the literary art still remains a male practice. Although women now have more freedom to write, many of their struggles are similar to those of the 19th century women writers.

Fanny Fern was an American novelist and columnist who attacked issues of women's rights, domesticity, and the male dominated society with humor. Fern was one of the most well known authors of the 19th century, and was the most highly paid author in America at the time (Samuels 28). She was also the first

woman in America to consistently write a newspaper column, in her case, in *The New York Ledger* (Samuels 28). Originally, Fern hoped to launch her literary career through her brother, N.S. Willis; however he stated that her writing was too “vulgar” and suggested that she should continue with her needlework instead, similar to what Anne Bradstreet had discussed in the 17th century (Lauter 2462). Such a comment from her brother emphasizes the extent to which men controlled women, even within the boundary of family. Fern illustrates a great sense of wit in *Hints to Young Housewives* and *Independence*, satirically depicting gender inequality in society. In her work *Critics* and *Male Criticism on Ladies Books*, again, Fern satirically criticizes male critics and male authors.

In *Critics*, Fern exclaims: “I never knew an editor to nob his pen with a knife as sharp as his temper, and write a scathing criticism on a book, because the authoress had declined contributing to his paper” (Lauter 2467). Fern expresses her anger towards male editors and authors and their selfishness and total disregard for women writers, in addition to their unjust treatment of her. It is evident that in her time, men were in control of literary art and such insight on the struggles of women writers were highlighted. She closes *Critics* with a highly satirical statement: “A man never stoops to a meanness. There never was criticism yet, born of envy, or malice, or repulsed lose, or disappointed ambition. No—no” (Lauter 2467). Using humor to address serious social issues was a trademark in Fern's writing – a technique that was used consistently and effectively throughout *Male Criticism on Ladies Books* as well.

In *Male Criticism on Ladies Books*, Fern bombards the reader with a number of rhetorical questions regarding the “feminine novel” (Lauter 2468): “Granted that lady-novels are not all that they should be—is such shallow, unfair, wholesale, sneering criticism the way to reform them? Would it not be better and more manly to point out a better way kindly, justly, and above all, respectfully?” (Lauter 2469) Fern exclaims her wish for respect and further states that she has “had quite enough of this shallow criticism on lady-books” (Lauter 2469). Such an honest proposal had a great impact toward women writers and encouraged them to speak their mind publicly without hesitation.

Fanny Fern has been one of the most powerful female writers who address the issues of gender inequality; however Harriet Jacobs shines another light on the same issue—that of the relationship between a black female slave and white slave owners. Jacobs, in *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), recounts her experience as a slave, under her pseudonym Linda Brent, describing her struggles with sexual exploitation, mistreatment by her owners, and family relations. After her freedom had been established, Jacobs gained the ability to write (Lauter 2338). However, Jacobs struggled from doubt to retell her story to the public. Although women writers in the 19th century struggled to be taken seriously in the

literary world, as a black woman Jacobs not only faced criticism from men, but from the entire white population of readers. "In her desire to go public with the worst facts of slavery, she was exposing herself to possible censure from the very group of women least likely to have shared the same experience," states Glenna Matthews, author of *The Rise of Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States, 1630-1970* (1992) (83). Jacobs not only addresses issues of slavery, but also asserts the fact that a woman has the right to choose another man after being a victim of sexual harassment, which consequently places an emphasis on her courage (85). For most women writers at the time, the mere act of "picking up a pen" (85) held a great significance, but Jacobs challenged what was feared in order to reveal the corruption of the unjust world that she lived in. It can be suggested, however, that her taking up of a persona, Linda Brent, helped her achieve this.

Many women writers in the 19th century, including Fanny Fern and Harriet Jacobs felt it was necessary to publish their writings under their pseudonyms. While some male authors such as Jozef Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad) and Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell) also used pseudonyms, their use of a pseudonym was a form of artistic expression, rather than a tool to conceal their true identity from the male dominated literary world (Sanders). Fern used a different name as an effort to keep her identity anonymous while writing for the *New York Ledger* (Lauter 2462). Similarly, Jacobs used her pseudonym Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in order to recount her harsh experience as a slave without having to face her fear of criticism from the white population (Sanders). Although Parton and Jacobs used female pseudonyms in their publications, other authors in the 19th century and contemporary authors today make use pseudonyms as well.

While Fern and Jacobs used female pseudonyms, Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), author of *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* and Louisa May Alcott (A.M. Barnard), author of renowned novel *Little Women* (1880) felt the need to use male pseudonyms to attain recognition in the literary world (Sanders). Evans wrote *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* under the name George Eliot in order to critique female novellas and to "distance herself from the female romance novelists of the time and to ensure that her works were taken seriously" (Sanders). Unlike Evans, Alcott did not publish *Little Women* under a pseudonym, but rather under her real name. Her articles and columns in the *Atlantic Monthly* during the 1860s, however, were published under her male pseudonym, A.M. Barnard (Sanders). Evans often wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* under Barnard, or anonymously, in order to attract a wider audience and to avoid being targeted by male critics.

The use of male pseudonyms is common for contemporary women writers as well, such as for Alice Bradley Sheldon (James Tiptree) and Joanne Rowling (J.K.

Rowling). Sheldon, author of *Star Songs of an Old Primate* (1978), wrote under the name James Tiptree in order to publish her work in the male dominated literary genre of science fiction. Before her death in 1987, Sheldon expressed her reasons for choosing an alternative name: "A male name seemed like good camouflage. I had the feeling that a man would slip by less observed. I've had too many experiences in my life of being the first woman in some damned occupation" (Phillips 47). However, Joanne Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, was urged to change her name to 'J.K.' Rowling by her publishers. The publishers claimed that Rowling would not attract enough young boys—who were the target audience—if they knew a woman had written the series. Although roughly two centuries have passed since the Victorian era, it is clear that women writers still struggle for recognition and acknowledgement, especially in the literary genres where men appear more dominant than women—such struggles are further described in an interview with Elizabeth Jane Howard.

Elizabeth Jane Howard, writer of the *Cazalet* tetralogy and winner of John Llewellyn Rhys Prize argues in *The Telegraph*: "I feel because we started writing novels really before men on the whole, they don't want us to even be good at that" (Silverman). Howard believes that male critics "scratch each other's backs," instead of allowing women writers to receive the proper respect and acknowledgement for the work they have produced (Silverman). Howard, being a writer herself, touches upon concerns of women writers as a whole, through her own experiences in the profession. Although it is evident that there has been significant change in men's perspective on women since the 19th century as Howard believes that "at higher levels, a talented male writer would have an easier journey than a talented female writer, who might very well get bad reviews. It depends enormously on who reviews the work," suggesting that although there has been improvement in the status of women writers since the 19th century, they still do not find complete freedom in taking part in an art that has been controlled by men and are still subject to discrimination (Silverman).

Even to this day, male writers in the literary world have forced women writers to stand in their shadows. Roxanne Gay, author of *Beyond the Measure of Men* has noticed that some light has shone the lack of acceptance of women writers, yet are still forced to "spend their valuable time demonstrating just how serious, pervasive, and far reaching this problem is instead of writing about more interesting topics." In a generation where women writers are flourishing by the minute and have the freedom to publish; the struggle of convincing the public (mostly the male audience) of the importance and credibility of their work still remains a reoccurring issue. Gay points to the unfortunate reality that even if women writers try to "prove" themselves with their work, they still remain unrecognized: "In the 2012 National Magazine Award finalists have been

announced and there were no women included in several categories—reporting, feature writing, profile writing, essays and criticism, and columns and commentary” (Gay). Even with the additional trouble women writers must face, their efforts often remain unappreciated and unnoticed.

Male criticism and the lack of gender equality in the literary world is not the only thing that women writers face in the 21st century. Within fiction, there is an arising category labeled as “women’s fiction,” which has been listed in a variety of online bookstores, such as Amazon. Author Nora Roberts defines “women’s fiction” as “a story that centers on a woman or on primarily women’s issues” (Craig). The category includes a variety of women writers from different time periods including Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, and Meg Wolitzer (Wolitzer). Meg Wolitzer, addresses the peculiarity of the unstable category in a New York Times article titled *The Second Shelf*. Wolitzer, author of *The Wife* (2003), points out the main problem in the category – that the “stylistic or thematic link” between the works of women (and some men) writers within the category is “hard to see” (Wolitzer). The category of “women’s fiction” is not the only category women writers are fixated in – the emergence of the group “American Women Novelists” now categorizes the women authors themselves.

Online blogger Maria Popova states in her blog, *Explore*, that she “noticed something strange on Wikipedia.” She noticed that over time, editors have been moving women novelists from the category of “American Novelists” to the subcategory of “American Women Novelists.” Although at first glance, such action does not seem to show any type of discrimination against women writers—that is, if the subcategory of “American Women Novelists” is accompanied by another subcategory of “American Male Novelists.” However, the subcategory appears specific to women novelists, the main category of “American Novelists” consists of men only. Although the intention may have been to create a less complicated category, because the subcategory isolates women novelists from the larger category, it creates an emphasis on the “other,” in which the editors places the women novelists. The 19th century women writers and contemporary women writers in the 20th and 21st centuries share similar concerns regarding male criticism and the lack of recognition and respect they attain, but the growth of the media has introduced a much more complex issue for women writers—that of organization. Furthermore, similar concerns for women writers may be seen in Greek and Chinese culture as well.

Emmanuel Roidis, a Greek novelist and critic, once stated that women should write “about needlework and cooking” and when addressing social and political issues, they are portrayed as imitators of the male gender (Dyck). Due to such degrading claims, Greek women writers often doubted themselves, and even now, believe

that calling themselves “women writers” would risk their reputation in society (Dyck). However, despite doubts and worries, women writers such as Margarita Karapanou addressed issues of censorship in Greek culture through her novel *Kassandra and the Wolf* (1976), where she parodied the tale of Little Red Riding Hood (Dyck). In Karapanou’s novel, the protagonist, Kassandra suffers from a habit of stuttering, which represents the act of silencing Greek women writers and others who address concerns of women. However, Karapanou subsequently challenges this idea of silence and powerlessness of the Greek woman by allowing the protagonist to be understood by others despite her stutter. Through a parody of a classic tale, Karapanou was able to object to male criticism.

Similar to writing in modern Greek culture, writing in modern Chinese culture still remains a male practice. The novels written by Lu Yin and Chen Hengzhe explore the concerns of women writers and argue that women’s writings in modern Chinese culture are perceived as an idea rather than a reality (Dooling). In addition, modern women writers remain at a similar status and gain minimal recognition as women writers in the imperial times. Amy Dooling, author of *Writing and Women in Modern China*, states that throughout the last few centuries, women writers “became a metaphor for China’s Westernization, a literary theme, and a symbol to be invoked and pondered by a male literary subject, rather than an accepted reality within literary circles” (Dooling). Such an issue is a reoccurring concern for women writers in America and Greece, suggesting that women writers experience similar struggles in different continents around the world. However, like American women writers, women writers in China have been slowly taking over literature as centuries pass. The dedication that Chinese women writers exert towards their writing has made them more powerful in the world of literature.

Since the 19th century, issues concerning the status of women writers have changed in America. The success of women writers have increased and now, they do not face as much unjust gender based remarks regarding their writing. Women—and their voices – have emerged and been heard by the public with more recognition and success. However, the issue of gender inequality still remains in the literary world. Man still stands as the dominant figure, and woman is forced to “prove” her worthiness; such discrimination is not specific to American women writers. Elizabeth Meese, author of *Women and Writing: A Re/Turn* has stated, “the situation of women in the academy, as writers and teachers, has improved to the extent that enormous gap has been created, and that the historic anger of invisibility, oppression, inequity, and harassment still exists, but with less representation” (Meese). Thus, she suggests that the status of women in the literary world has improved since the 19th century, but there remain

countless issues that need to be addressed and changed. In a concluding note, I would like to share the wise advice of Eliza Leslie:

"If she is a writer of fiction, and you presume to take the liberty of criticizing her works...refrain from urging that certain incidents are *improbable*, and certain characters *unnatural*. Of this it is impossible for you to judge, unless you could have lived the very same life that she has; known exactly the same people; and inhabited with her the same places." (Samuels 6)

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