

Men writing Women Constructions of Femininity through the Perspective of Men and the Quest to do Gender Well

Haifaa Mohammad, Aaliya Ahmed

haifaa.ahsan[at]gmail.com

Abstract: *Gender differences in language have been of interest to researchers because these differences are assumed to explain, in part, the nature of relationships between men and women. The primary explanation for these differences is the use of dominant and submissive roles by males and females. The folk linguistic assumptions such as; women are more talkative than men (chattering women), or men interrupt women more, have been among the controversial topics in gender studies. At the same time, in almost all the literature written in different social and cultural communities, we can find some writing of men in favor of women's issues or at least highlighting their problems in the mostly patriarchal societies. Some male writers have presented powerful, very influential and realistic female characters throughout the history of world literature. This paper analyses the author, Mohsin Hamid's Female protagonist in Exit west to conclude that an authentic portrayal of the feminine experience is obtained which is evident in his writing.*

Keywords: Feminine, Women's Writing, Feminism, Literature, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Alan Williamson in his book *Almost a Girl: Male Writers and Female Identification* argues that gender criticism has for too long been shaped and limited by the same dualisms that have defined male versus female literary voices in Western culture. Certain emotions expressed in literature are considered "feminine," certain emotions are typed as "masculine," and there is little room in critical studies for the male writer who shares in feminine experiences or who finds himself on the wrong ideological side of those firmly gendered dichotomies. Confined by such strict codes, male writers possessing the sensibilities typecast as feminine often face a crisis of gender identity. They struggle to overcome early childhood experience and adult cultural expectations as men with feminine creative emotions that are often repressed in more conventionally masculine lives. (Williamson, 2001).

In the year 1975 the French feminist author Helene Cixous published an essay called "The Laugh of the Medusa". In it, she developed an entirely new theoretical concept called *Ecriture Feminine*, which literally translates to "women's writing". It "refers to a uniquely feminine style of writing characterized by disruptions in the text such as gaps, silences, puns, images and so on" (Nambrol). According to Cixous, only men live and experience as men and only women live and experience as women; therefore, only men can speak as/for men and only women can speak as/for women.

Yet men have been writing feminine ever since men began writing. Women are consistently characterized as having a consistent predisposition to be communal—to care for and attend to the well-being of others. The typical woman is thought to be kind, caring, sensitive, empathic, and emotional. However, men are believed to be primarily agentic and instrumental. The characteristic male is felt to be independent, confident, decisive, aggressive, and strong (Deaux & Lewis, 1984)

Gender and Language

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At the same time, in almost all the literature written in different social and cultural communities, we can find some writing of men in favor of women's issues or at least highlighting their problems in the mostly patriarchal societies. Some male writers have presented powerful, very influential and realistic female characters throughout the history of world literature. The female characters of William Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and Gabriel Garcia Marquez are only examples among many others.

The question is of how the interpretation of such natural phenomena is to be accommodated within a cognitively oriented pragmatic theory. How is femininity being written and interpreted by male writers? What do they convey? How, if at all, is it different from women writing femininity?

2. Aims and Objectives

Men and women, it is commonly believed, write differently. My aim is to analyze the difference in the way femininity is written by male fiction writers and whether these characteristic differences are of such importance. If several important male writers have drawn creative strength from their identification with a positive image of the feminine, why is it that there is insistence among feminist literary critics that femininity can only be expressed by women? I intend to inspect more closely Elaine Showalter's idea that "All reading and writing, by men as well as by women, is marked by gender." The idea that femininity in its truest form can only be expressed by those living a feminine life.

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Is it possible then those men, despite conforming to the ideals of masculinity to its fullest, can write feminine literature not by experiencing, but by observing femininity around?

The main objectives of this research are:

- To analyze the way gender issues are portrayed and addressed.
The idea of *Eriecture Feminine* or women's writing where in only those belonging to the same gender can truly be able to understand such issues.
- To analyze the interference of gender of the novelist in the way he/she portrays the female characters.
Whether the sample in question conforms to the *difference paradigm* where in the reason of difference in communication between the two sexes is assigned to different socialization and early childhood experiences, or to the *dominant paradigm* where this difference is attributed to male's dominance over women which persists to keep women subordinate.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, particularly the character of Nadia. Fiction is fabricated and based on the author's imagination and hence makes for a better sample to determine the way femininity is written by men. The writer has complete and utter control over the characters, the storyline and hence the characteristics of those that make up the story. Such features allow for the writer to project his/her ideas about gender on to the plot easily.

This paper uses textual analysis, in order to get a better understanding of linguistic information and of how power flow operates between the two sexes. Using this methodology would offer space for competing voices and diverse accounts of experience and resist a single line of argument or closure. It explores the differences within and between sexes including their experiences of the complexities and ambiguities of power.

Masculine Femininity of Nadia

Exit west revolves around the two main characters, Sayeed and Nadia who are a young college going couple caught in between an uprising in their country and the whole story unfolds while they are trying to get away from their conflict driven country to a safer place. The novel has elements of magical realism where in there are magical doors which lead to different places of the world. Amid all of this Saeed and Nadia's relationship experiences strains and they drift apart as they migrate from one place to another.

Hamid's *exit west* is a beautifully told story where gendered notions are challenged and the fluidity of the construct is apparent. With shift in their surroundings the reader gets to see Nadia's femininity sliding on and off towards masculinity. This fluidity is visible at the very beginning of the introduction of Nadia's character. Hamid writes his female protagonist in a gender fluid way wherein she doesn't conform to the traditional roles of gender or sexuality. She

decides to live on her own in what appears to be a conservative society when she feels her freedom is being tampered with. This headstrong nature is usually typical of male characters but Hamid deviates from the norm depicting her to be assertive and decisive in her actions.

Nadia's clothing is especially fascinating as she adorns a black robe wherever she goes. However, the robe, that is traditionally worn for religious purposes and holds a symbol of conservatism and traditionalism, acquires new meaning for her. Hamid through the character of Nadia shows an understanding of the nuanced reasons that such clothing is adorned. That a linear meaning of the robe isn't true and it holds a much more varied meaning to women. Hamid brings forth the idea that apart from religious purposes, Nadia wears this robe as a shield so the opposite gender considers her to be conservative and won't harass her. The female experience is well written by Hamid and tends to have authenticity in it.

Subsequently over the course of Nadia and Saeed's relationship, Nadia holds to a much more dominant position where she becomes the leader in majority of the situations while Saeed becomes the follower. This trope is not usually visible in stereotypically written characters. Nadia is the one to initiate sex and time and again Saeed refuses to do so. Nadia tends to give in to her desires while Saeed attempts to regain some form of control over them. Over the course of the story unfolding the communication patterns of both the sexes fall within the difference paradigm where an acquiring different childhood experience garners difference in the way they communicate.

Hamid also rejects the idea of *Eriecture Feminine* by being able to write a female character with real life situations and authentic response to those situations. Even though the writer himself identifies as male, it is observed that the writer draws from social contexts and clues, and the experiences of the females around him so as to bring forth a genuine character rooted in real events. The reader connects with Nadia and while reading through the text she comes across as a complete character with authentic female experiences and responses thereof, further grounding Hamid's work to fit into the Difference paradigm. It is possible that Hamid draws on the female experience just by observing those around him which results in creation of a realistic character like Nadia.

Nadia tries to navigate through a patriarchal setup by not conforming to the expected gender norms. Marriage and the sacrifice of one's individuality, particularly on the side of a woman for the benefit of her children, are among patriarchy's most successful methods for limiting her mobility and ensuring her domesticity and she successfully avoids it all to have a more fulfilling life even while the country spirals into conflict.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Mohsin Hamid writes his female character as a fluid, performative, and ambiguous construct in his narratives, thereby assisting the characters in defying the normative matrix. Nadia experiences gender transference

while fighting dominant discourses of the normative matrix by preferring her orientation to traditional standards of femininity. Through the character of Nadia, Hamid creates alternative discourses of resistance and change. Under the impact of masculine agency, Nadia is more likely to be viewed as agentic or performative in her driving function. To put it another way, Nadia's intrepid dominance is inextricably linked to masculinity since she lacked feminine autonomy. Similarly, she played the role of a young woman who was a real representative of the dominant discourse in her unknown homeland.

Generally, during the first half of the story, Hamid builds his female character in a way that consists of those difficult roles reversal moves through which readers can perceive Nadia's sex drive in her connections with a dozen men, including Saeed and the pianist. For the second part of the story, on the other hand, Hamid focuses on Nadia's decision to abandon heterogeneity in favor of her lesbian inclination.

Hamid in *Exit West* forms his narrative around fragmented images of breaking in/out of gender identity through its female protagonist's experiences in territorial zones of migration. As a result, the negotiation of gender and the female experience becomes a prominent theme of the novel. Hamid's symbolic masculinization of his female protagonist is investigated in light of the required instance that has been offered to deconstruct rigid and binary gender and sexual categories, thereby subverting the normative matrix.

With *Exit West*, the author has tried to initiate an alternate discourse where in the female experience is authentically portrayed by a male thereby rejecting the idea of *Ecriture Feminine* and adding to the existing body of literature under the difference paradigm.

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