

The Rise of Early American Female Writers in Parallel with the Rise of America as a Nation

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The rise of early American women as a reflection of the rise of America as a nation itself is an interesting idea. In the early seventeenth century, a group of Puritans who opposed the majority in England embarked on a difficult voyage to America so that they may live in accordance with their beliefs; with time, they formed an independent nation. From the American feminist perspective, American women have experienced a similar situation only that the minority do not comprise a group of Puritans but rather women who are supposedly the “inferior” sex of that culture. The aim of this paper is to study the rise of early American women as a form of a “minority revolution” within the larger scheme of events that is, the rise of America as a nation and how literature became the means of this intellectual revolution for both minorities.

Feminism is not a movement dedicated to promoting the usurpation of women under the ideological notion of power. If this were the case, feminism would be as biased as the very same constitution it is fighting! It is far beyond the naïve understanding of it as a concept that positions women as above or equal to men. In essence, feminism is a formal recognition of women as part of the collective consciousness: “Feminist theorizing, in its project of writing women into theory and law, thus became a strategy of resistance. Feminist scholars drew from a range of ideologies to challenge existing disciplinary paradigms”. (“Feminist Theory and Women's Studies”). Therefore, designating feminism as a movement in itself outside other disciplines does, more harm than good to feminism. To understand its essence, one needs to remove the limitations of its specific definition and to incorporate its founding principles with those of other disciplines so that it may become tangible and dynamic. The methodology used in this paper is one that links the movement of a new nation's politics with the rise of its women as a collective consciousness; that is, feminism itself is transformed into another form of politics:

Attention to the construction of texts demonstrates that this subfield is still preoccupied with “origin stories” that are deeply influenced by the construction of gender in our own society. Yet even within feminist anthropology the construction of the problem of “women and state” is also informed by these same origin issues and may have restricted the variability we have been able to see among different states as well as the kind of resistance women have mounted against state structures. (Di Leonardo 8)

The relationship between “women and state” is the key to unlocking the role of women in any emerging form of state. When women become more than what the “origin stories” label them to be, true change emerges in a nation; that is, the very basic structure of that nation is altered by women who write, read, teach and formulate and express opinions. At this stage in the relationship between women and state, feminism evolves from merely serving the name of “women's rights” into becoming a newly constructed version of an already established state. That is the reason why the case of early American women is highly intriguing from a feminist perspective specifically in terms of the transformation of a nation and how their views affected the rise of that nation.

One can only imagine the adversity that early American women experienced and how it was compounded by their minority status. These women not only sought to promote the rise of America but, also dealt with double standards. For early American men, they were escaping England so that they may live in accordance with their religious ideological practices. They were not under any threat of moving from a patriarchal society into a more oppressive society. Yet for early American women, the situation was very different:

The term “patriarchy” (meaning literally “rule by the fathers”) has been used in various ways, and feminists have debated its utility. Traditional political thought has claimed that the patriarchy defended by theorists such as Robert Filmer has been replaced by the democracy advocated by Locke, Jefferson, and others. Feminists, however, have shown that the social contract theory that based political rule on a hypothetical contract among equals instead of on inherited rule by a paternal monarch still maintained the rule of men over women. (Held 4)

Hence, oppression still existed in a society that claimed to be free of oppression and allowed freedom of thought! Within a feminist context, American Puritans, who demanded religious freedom, formed another part of the larger façade controlled by male dominance. Some early American women challenged this “imaginary sense of freedom.” Such challenges occurred in various domains, including literature, politics business and the most dangerous of them all, religion.

The present study examines why early American women needed to write and how the pen became an effective weapon in this fight for their rights, and why literature became the figurative battlefield upon which women strived to succeed and express their own ideas and opinions. The following passage describes the Western literary canon and explains how women were excluded from it although they formed a huge part of it:

In Western culture a consensus has been built about what are the primary works of literature, the works with which every educated person should be familiar. This list is called the canon. Most of these works, however, were written by white males. Furthermore, part of why these works have been considered to have universal appeal has been that literature has been judged by white male critics, who experience life in similar ways. Therefore, one of the literary concerns of feminism is to challenge these traditional assumptions and to encourage serious interest in literature by women, including women of color. A result of the feminist critique of this predominantly white male canon is that what appears to be a universal human viewpoint is exposed as, in fact, the viewpoint of only one group. (“Feminism Reflected in Literature”)

This interposition of literature as a means of expression does not diminish the importance of the rise of America as a nation. In fact, it strengthens the power of a minority revolution. If one replaced “men” with “England” in the same canon, one would recognize that early American feminism is but another form of apolitical struggle that needed literature as a vantage point.

The struggle of American women does not differ from that of women in the rest of the world, where women are viewed as incapable of doing what men can do as members of a society. However, difference exists in the ways that American women managed to prove themselves to the majority by exhibiting their capability in three domains: literature, culture, and religion. One such woman who achieved great success in literature was Anne Bradstreet, who came to America in 1630 as part of the Great Migration of Puritans to what became known as New England. Through her use of irony and rhetoric, Bradstreet proved that she could indeed write better than most male writers.

Any suppression in a society eventually leads to a rebellion. In Puritan society Bradstreet armed herself with a pen and wrote poetry that has become recognized as a major development in the feminist stream of female writers all over the world. In her poem “The Prologue”(1650), Bradstreet seems to document merely the stereotypes of female writers in her society. However, a deeper reading of the poem points to a web of ironical statements in which she defies the very same stereotypes to which she refers:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong, For such despite they cast
on female wits: If what I do prove well, it won't advance, They'll say it's
stol'n, or else it was by chance. (25-30)

Moreover, Bradstreet proved that she could write about not only women’s issues, but also politics. In her poem “In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth”(1650), Bradstreet uses her poetic genius to tackle issues surrounding the different states of England and America and what it means to belong to both nations:

No *Phoenix* Pen, nor *Spenser's* Poetry, No *Speed's*, nor *Camden's* learned
History; *Eliza's* works, wars, praise, can e're compact, The World's the
Theater where she did act. No memories, nor volumes can contain, The nine
Olymp'ades of her happy reign, Who was so good, so just, so learn'd, so
wise, From all the Kings on earth she won the prize. (1-8)

In this poem, Bradstreet brilliantly showcases the capabilities of women in two ways by making Queen Elizabeth I, one of Britain’s greatest monarchs, the actual subject of her poem and by deftly expressing through her choice of words and phrases the true genius of the queen as a ruler. In doing so, Bradstreet reveals what women writers can accomplish and challenges male writers in turn to elevate their own writing. Both of Bradstreet’s poems were written around the year 1650, almost twenty years after her arrival in America. The length of time between Bradstreet’s arrival in America and the creation of her poetry indicates that women were treated as inferior and subordinate to men throughout the early years of Puritan habitation in America. Female Puritans did not experience a “new age” of freedom; they instead remained locked in a patriarchal society.

The other beacon of light in the darkness of this male dominant society was Sara Kemble Knight, a teacher and businesswoman who is remembered for her diary account of a journey from Boston, Massachusetts Bay Colony, to New York City in 1704–05. In her journals, Madam Knight (as she was commonly called) not only challenged men through her competent writing abilities but also proved to be physically strong in enduring a very arduous journey. Her mission was to be a productive member of her society by documenting differences in culture and customs in several colonies. The journey of Madam Knight demonstrates a case of a predated form of performative feminism, which is defined as follows:

A sixth approach to feminist political philosophy is emerging, what could be called performative feminist political philosophy. Performative feminist politics doesn't worry about whether it is possible to come up with a single definition of "woman" or any other political identity; it sees identity as something that is performatively created. "How we assume these identities," Drucilla Cornell writes, "is never something 'out there' that effectively determines who we can be as men and women[...]." It is something that is shaped as we live and externalize identities. From a performative feminist perspective, feminism is a project of anticipating and creating better political futures in the absence of foundations. (McAfee, "Feminist Political Philosophy")

Madam Knight exhibited independence that was centuries ahead of her time. Not even bothering to defend women, Madam Knight simply acted as an independent woman and became a very early example of a businesswoman who could both write and perform.

The challenges these women faced in the domains of literature and culture were considered outrageous to some of the most traditional readers of their time. However, the rise of early America occurred only because of the need to maintain a certain ideological and Puritan system. These women defied stereotypes previously mentioned here in literary and cultural domains. However, the religious sphere was not very merciful toward women. For example, there is the famous case of Anne Hutchinson, who much like Madam Knight and Bradstreet, attempted to prove her own uniqueness and individualistic take on religious doctrines by being more open to new ideas, was accused of heresy. When Hutchinson expressed her "new ideas," many believed that she was polluting their pure society (as opposed to enlighten it). As a consequence, she was presented in court as a blight on society:

Children often parrot the phrase "religious freedom" as being the reason why the pilgrims came to America. We sugarcoat the real story of genocide and oppression in favor of construction paper-pilgrim hats, paper mache turkeys, cornucopias. But the reality is that, regardless of original intentions, the Puritans came to America to religiously oppress without being religiously oppressed by the Church of England.

Part of the Puritanical oppression included the limitations of the rights of women. All municipal affairs were the responsibility of men. Women, who were often seen as Jezebels and were inextricably linked to the first sin of Eve [...]. At one point, these women were not even allowed to speak in church. So when Anne Hutchinson, a born Puritan, midwife, and mother of fifteen children started preaching her interpretation of the Bible at small gatherings, leaders like Winthrop started to worry. (O'Brien-Kakley, "Bolder Than Men: Anne Hutchinson, America's Pilgrim Feminist")

Hutchinson was considered a threat to sacred and religious doctrines. Yet there was more to it than that as evident from the account of the events of the trial and the dialogue between Hutchinson and Winthrop, who was the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony at the time of the trial. Hutchinson posed a threat to men in that society. Through her meaningful understanding of religious doctrines, and her intelligent arguments, she was slowly taking control and loosening the grip of males, led by Winthrop, on their society. Similar to the other female writers previously mentioned here, Hutchinson personified an independent woman living in a patriarchal society. However, unlike Bradstreet and Madam Knight, Hutchinson treaded a very dangerous path that is religion which was off limits in the Puritan society of early America.

Using their intelligence, American women climbed the ladder to female independence and, in doing so, proved themselves to be more than capable of reading and conducting analysis. They not only challenged stereotypes but also worked through these stereotypes to achieve recognition and garner respect in their society. Becoming more than mere writers in the literary canon, they elevated themselves as critics, thus fusing the female identity furthermore within the fabric of the literary constitution:

Feminist *literary* criticism has been a part of this challenge, questioning the most basic institutions of literary studies: how we evaluate literature, how we constitute knowledge about it, how its study is determined by the structure of the academy, and how it is separated from other disciplines. From these questions have come serious critiques of how literature is taught, why it is taught, and who teaches it. Literary study has been dramatically changed in the last two and half decades, largely as a result of the feminist critique of it as an institution. (Warhol and, Herndl 3)

The writings of early American women remain immortal as proof of their struggle and the difference they made not only in America but also in the canon of literature as a whole. Through the changes made in the canon as an “institution,” one can understand how they affected the nation’s power through its literature.

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