Undergraduate Review

Volume 10 | Issue 1 Article 8

1997

Feminist Literature: Confessional Writing Beyond National Boundaries

Heather Blaha '98
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev

Recommended Citation
Blaha '98, Heather (1997) "Feminist Literature: Confessional Writing Beyond National Boundaries," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol10/iss1/8

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Feminist Literature: Confessional Writing Beyond National Boundaries

Heather Blaha

Throughout feminist politics of the 1900s, feminist writing has emerged as a strong and significant chorus of voices. Women have been heard from as far away as Japan, where in 1911 Seitoscha was formed as an independent feminist group. The same year, South African Olive Schreiner wrote *Woman and Labour,* establishing a connection between feminism and equal rights. More than thirty years later the Egyptian Feminist Party was founded by Fatma Nimat Rashid which followed Virginia Woolf's writing of *A Room of One's Own* and helped lead the way for Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949. Many British and American organizations began their foundations as well, and soon most women, and some men, could see that feminist literature was joining in a common goal across the globe. Women of all nationalities and races began responding powerfully to the social and political times surrounding them and since the 1960s their individual yet unifying effort has led to some of the most influential writings of the twentieth century. Although this writing has taken on various forms by various women, perhaps the deepest story lies in the personal narrative which expresses truth beyond fiction and which connects and paves the literary road for women writers who follow.

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, two kinds of feminist narrative of

self-discovery are discussed. The first is characterized by a historical structure in which female self-discovery is seen as a process of moving outward into the public realm of society—often represented in realist feminist fiction. The second is a depiction of self-discovery as an awakening to an inner self that occurs in nature or of which the social world is not a part. Most of the feminist literature, autobiographies, and memoirs that I would like to focus on, however, are in fact created from the many social changes and frustrations that women encounter throughout their lives. To disregard society in their writing would be to disregard parts of history, and that is truly impossible since women, men, politics, writings, and families of the past are what have shaped these women's lives.

Both feminist literature and feminist politics organize the meaning of the liberation of women as a group through individual conceptions of history and experience. In *Writing as Re-Vision,* Adrienne Rich writes:

> We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.

Rich sees that the crucial element towards moving forward, towards understanding the shape of one's written experience now, can only be accomplished when this re-vision occurs. Women should not only learn and break past traditions out of the necessity of survival, but out of their desire to understand and link themselves to a past which continues to shape today's writing as well.

Before digging deeply into feminist texts, it seems crucial to touch on the historical and political events that in fact led to such writings. The world's first organized movement in behalf of women was inaugurated in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. There, Elizabeth Cady Stanton delivered her first public speech, saying that she was "nerved" only by her conviction that the time had come for "the question of woman's wrongs to be laid before the public" and that "woman herself

must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length and the breadth of her own degradation" (Schneir ix). Through the campaigning of American women for their legal, employment, and educational rights, the cause soon was taken up in western Europe as well, and feminists from all over eventually formed international alliances.

Although the majority of what is considered feminist literature was written after the 1960s, early feminists and their writings were just as crucial a starting point, even though their impact may not have instantly been quite as strong. After the passing of the women's right to vote, much discussion of feminism had ended, but authors like Virginia Woolf continued with their quest and with their writing. Woolf, part of the first-wave feminism, believed that "women constituted a sex-class within their social groups and that such a grouping was not simply a sign of victimization but a means of providing women with the germ of organization between women and thus a coherent and radical politics" (Humm 21). With Woolf's basic argument that gender identity is socially constructed and that inequality begins early in the male dominated family, her highly influential book, *A Room of One's Own,* continues to show today's women the social and physical dominance which men possess.

In one part of *A Room of One's Own* Woolf writes of what it may have been like if Shakespeare had had a sister:

> She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. (51)

So many social obstacles would have prevented her from expressing any of the talent she had. For a woman to write fiction, she must have a room of her own so that what she could offer to other women and to the world has the room to flourish and expand. She writes that they must

have that liberty "to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future and the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream" (Woolf 119). A profound influence over later twentieth-century women writers, Woolf never separated herself from her writing, but was every "she" and "her" in her work.

Actually defining what constitutes feminist literature is not something which can be accomplished in narrow terms. First, a look must be taken at the word "feminist" itself. Alison Jaggar concluded it to be "all forms of theory and practice that seek, no matter on what grounds and by what means to end the subordination of women" (Felski 12). Determining, therefore, what constitutes feminist literature remains nebulous. What texts society deems as feminist literature changes through the decades, as the society of which they are a product changes. The early feminists were indeed internationalists but their contacts were confined to only developed areas of the world. The perspective of today's feminists, though, has reached new global dimensions. It includes locations where "women suffer from poverty and hunger, where conception is uncontrolled and childbirth dangerous, where wives and daughters are virtual chattels of husbands and fathers, where female illiteracy is widespread, and where genital mutilation is practiced" (Schneir xiv).

Obviously the role of the feminist, and the feminist writer, has taken a more active turn since Virginia Woolf and other literary women writing prior to the 1960s. Stemming from females' reactions to a society dominated by men come many written journeys of women whose search inward has connected with women everywhere. These many searches, recorded and shared with women readers, work at exploring both what essentially it means to be a woman in a male environment and her personal growth within.

Beverly Jones, who wrote *Toward a Female Liberation Movement*, said that "the first step" in female liberation "is to accept our plight as a common plight, to see other women as reflections of ourselves" (109). This type of belief is what helped many women free themselves from feeling insufficient simply for being a woman or from any weights they

felt as a result of living in a "man's" world. A world where the following passage was experienced by women again and again:

> . . . the female student feels like a citizen, like an individual among others in the body politics in the civil society, in the world of the intellect. What she doesn't understand is that upon graduation she is stripped of her public life and relegated to the level of private property. Enslavement is her farewell present. As things stand now she is doomed to become someone's secretary or someone's nurse, or someone's wife, or someone's mistress. From now on if she has some contribution to make to society she is expected to make it privately through the man who owns some part of her. (Jones 115)

Although a rather harsh view of a woman's life—"doomed" to become a nurse for instance, when many women do this out of desire and are proud and respected for it—Jones still makes blatantly clear that what she is capable of *is* in fact limited by her "place."

Women's literature's main contribution to other women is the endless list of autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries. These writers have chosen to give of their experiences wholly to their readers, and what better way to understand and connect than through pure experience? Although different authors obviously will have varied intentions, they inevitably offer (through their own self-awareness) "self help" to their readers. Self help does not have the negative connotation here of being needy or dependent; rather it is a springboard for change, and being active and alive through a process of realization. Reading of other women's lives aids in training "self-confidence and creative powers" (Rose 21), allowing readers to explore more of themselves and society than they might on their own.

Christopher Lasch calls the feminist confession "the banality of pseudo self-awareness" (Felski 86). A man, however, critiquing woman in this way is just as "pseudo self-aware" of himself if he cannot see his role in knocking down what these women writers are working so hard to build up. He cannot begin to understand the relevance of such works to women as a whole because he has not experienced the role of the

woman, and he is not a woman reader in need of gender connection. So the words and ideas are instantly rendered differently in his mind. Of course I am not intending to discredit male readers and imply that their sympathies are never in the right place. Many women are beyond fortunate to have men's understanding in their written lives. But the men who do see their significance and contribution to women's literature realize that they will never be fully aware of the struggles and experiences women have endured in this society, although these men are given every opportunity to help with the change through their own means of expression.

The autobiography is the act of confession, a liberation, which reveals many political aspects through personal experience and confronting social gender roles. The confession is actually considered a subgenre of the autobiography: making private knowledge a public truth for women readers. Texts such as Kate Millett's *Flying* (1974) and Ann Oakley's *Taking it Like a Woman* (1984) share a "foregrounding of the relationship between a female author and a female reader" (Felski 88). This link of the author and the reader is significant as well as crucial as it addresses a "we," a union and merging together.

The significance of confessions relies on placing them in a socio-historical context. Rita Felski writes that "feminist confession is less concerned with unique individuality or notions of essential humanity than with delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together" (94). Late in the sixties, during what was called second-wave feminism, the civil rights movement and Vietnam politicized literature. Women's writing of memoirs and autobiographies "took on a new edge as people began to realize that the publication of life stories by those outside the mainstream constituted political statement" (Rose 15).

At the on-set of second-wave feminism was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex.* Although not an autobiography, this epic dealt with the issue of female oppression in a way that targeted society and various social constructs. De Beauvoir was adamant in her belief that womanhood as we know it is a social construct, just as Virginia Woolf insisted.

Female subordination, therefore, had nothing to do with nature, but was the result of the forces society places on its members. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," she wrote (Schneir 3).

De Beauvoir concluded that knowledge, culture, and art, along with the rest of civilization, was of man's making. She called men the "subjects" of their own lives and women the "objects." She did, however, remain optimistic towards a future in which women could overcome their physical disadvantages with the progress of technology—including contraception and abortion. Her introduction shows the power with which she continues to write about women's issues in relation to the grand social scheme:

> The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage,which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations. (Schneir 4)

Some of the most influential works of this "new" literature of second-wave feminists were written by African-American women, which undoubtedly aided in an understanding that the black woman's struggle was one of a different degree of difficulty. Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) touched the lives of other women as she describes putting herself through a small black college in the South and taking part in civil rights protests. Maya Angelou was another powerful influence, recounting her experience with segregation in the American South as well. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Angelou shows the confusion of her childhood, sometimes the rage at what she saw, and often the lack of comfort or confidence she had in herself. In one of many brilliant scenes, Angelou, as a young girl, watches from inside as her grandmother is humiliated by the "powhitetrash" girls. Her grandmother, though, remained composed and dignified, offering no harsh response at all to their cruelty. Angelou explains that "some-

thing happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand, but I could see that she was happy" (Angelou 32). "Momma" then carries on singing, "Glory, glory, hallelujah, when I lay my burden down" (Angelou 32), a truly inspiring moment amidst the constant degradation.

Since "black women have suffered cruelly more so in this society from living the phenomenon of being black and female in a country that is *both* racist and sexist" (Humm 140), their plight exemplified an undying power and strength. Among them is also Alice Walker, whose writing exemplifies the main features and varieties of black feminism, but in no way excludes coalitions with white feminists. Instead, she suggests "that all feminists are writing one huge story with different perspectives" (Humm 140). However strong a unified women's voice may seem, though, there is still a difference between the "stories" of women of color and those of Euro-American women. One of Walker's features as a writer is her historical account of both black and white men specifically violating *black* women. In her writing she draws on a spiritual transformation that combines with social circumstances and shows her readers that a black feminist writer has a different history—a different experience—that should not be lost or blurred among the rest of feminist literature.

Audre Lorde, another woman who dealt with multiple forms of oppression, had to deal with a third factor: her homosexuality. She believed that she could not be "simply a Black person and not be a woman too," nor could she be "a woman without being a lesbian" (Schneir 137). Lorde argues that a black feminist standpoint must be a "holistic" knowledge. Women must combine an African understanding of emotion with the rationality of the Europeans to counteract sexism and racism. She blends history, myth, and poetry to show women's cultural differences. At the same time she emphasizes that the will and need to survive remain the same among all women. Lorde addresses the complications of "interracial sisterhood," writing in her poem, "Who Said It Was Simple", of her personal forms of oppression from being black, lesbian, and of course, a woman. This excerpt from the poem simply states her complex struggles:

But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see cause in color
as well as sex.

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations. (Schneir 137)

Although such poetry may be seen as a type of confessional writing, it is still separate from the autobiographies and memoirs which women have taken on as their means of telling their story to the rest of the female world. Autobiographical confession assumes a guarantee of the truthfulness in its depiction of life and the writer's inner feelings towards that life. It is also, though, a representation of experience—bringing to light a communal female identity. Confessional writing exemplifies the problems and contradictions of the everyday life of the female, and distinguishes among those experiences which may be of stronger importance in relating to the women it reaches.

Women writing for women have the strong desire for inclusiveness in their work, believing that it is only by recounting each detail as it occurs that life and the text can combine into one (Felski 97). Feminist confession works in such personal, unconventional literary forms in order to show a text's open-endedness and ability to go around written (male) tradition. It also gives the reader a feeling of being personally addressed by the author, which gives the text that much more power.

In general, the feminist confession attempts to diminish the importance of the organization of experience as done in the historical, more traditional narrative. Rita Felski simply explains that "it self-consciously addresses a community of *female* readers rather than an undifferentiated general public" (99), since language not only identifies male superiority but also produces it. Women view language and writing as a crucial means of altering an already existing male dominance. So it could be said that the feminist writer actually communes with her women readers. This effect of communing with the reader is gained through the

intimate writing style as well as the subject. Of course, the implied reader is the sympathetic female, who will understand and share the author's position. Audre Lorde writes, "We share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us" (Felski 100)—the "we" referring to the community of women to which the text is addressed.

As women's writing continued flourishing all over the world, poet, novelist, and playwright Meena Alexander shares her experience as an Indian woman—not only in India, but in Britain and America as well. In her memoir, *Fault Lines,* she asks, "What would it mean for one such as I to pick up a mirror and try to see her face in it?" (Conway 490). The only way for her to draw on an answer to this question is to reach into the memories she has stored from growing up and living in various cultures. These things are what lead towards identifying what has shaped her as a woman, and toward understanding her identity. She discusses the English language as well. At first she describes it as part of her reaching out for the new world of which she was quickly becoming part. Later, however, she realized that English was actually something she allowed to be forced upon her so that she could gain an education. She asks another question: "How could I possibly have received an Arabic education? What would that have equipped me for?"

In her early attempts to write the stories of her life and of the people from which she came, she felt trapped because English did not allow her to express many of the voices she remembered and the history she desired to share. Her statement that "Colonialism seemed intrinsic to the burden of English in India, and I felt robbed of literacy in my own mother tongue" (Conway 523) tells us how the cultural difference of another man's world has hindered her narrative voice. She did, however, overcome this obstacle as best as she could and now writes memoirs which share much of her life's experience. Alexander finds the autobiography a powerful and inclusive meeting ground as well: "I was fascinated by the corrosive magic of the first person singular: its exuberant flights, its sheer falls into despair" (Conway 490). Although we might not be able to grasp the full understanding of an Arabic people—an

Arabic woman—using the English language, the memoir succeeds at drawing us into Meena Alexander's private space.

Writing from a feminist perspective seems a truly authentic way in which women may get to "know" other women. It transcends everyday communication, becoming an act which omits any possible superficial qualities. While emphasizing the deeply personal dimensions of one's experience, feminism connects these with the social, institutionalized, nature of female oppression. Feminist confessional writing is not simply "self-awareness therapy" as many might argue—its aspects move beyond that and into various cultural and social realms. Felski describes the distinction and individualness of the confession:

> Whereas the rise of the novel occurs at the same time with the emergence of the ideology of romantic love and the idealization of marriage, which provides a basis for most of its narratives, the feminist confession proceeds from the recognition of the redundancy of this model and its oppressive implications for women. (116)

In 1976, Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (Belsey 8) reinstated in the second-wave the idea that feminist interest in literature is an aspect of the culture as a whole. Her book is a significant contribution to this short literary history in that it addresses the exclusion of women from so many parts of social and political life. This is what in effect prompted women to write of themselves, where they felt their place was, and how it may be changed with the giving and receiving of other women's contributions. This could easily be labeled an expansion of literary history.

Therefore, for the feminist reader there is no neutral approach to reading literature since all interpretation evolves politically. The reader must think of how that text represents women both individually and together as a gender, what it says about male/female relations, and how sexual difference is defined. Writers are setting out a hope that others will also reaffirm or challenge cultural norms based on sex.

Second-wave feminism opened new doors for women's writing which found inspiration and guidance from those writing earlier in the century. Judith Ortiz Cofer acknowledges Virginia Woolf's memoir, *A*

Sketch of the Past, which she says helped guide her through her literary exploration of her own Puerto Rican childhood. Her epigraph, too, is from Woolf: "A woman writing thinks back through her mother" (Rose 22). Also described is Cofer's "savoring" of a community of women and their separateness which second-wave feminist thought also praised.

Kennedy Fraser has written about a time in her own life when reading about other women was crucial in helping her situation:

> I was unhappy, and ashamed of it. I was baffled by my life. For several years in my early thirties, I would sit in my armchair reading books about these other lives. Sometimes when I came to the end, I would sit down and read the book through from the beginning again. I remember an incredible intensity about all this, and also a kind of furtiveness—as if I were afraid that someone might look through the window and find me out. Even now I feel I should pretend that I was reading only these women's fiction or their poetry—their lives as they chose to present them, alchemized as art. But that would be a lie. It was the private essays I really liked—the journals and letters, and autobiographies and biographies whenever they seemed to be telling the truth. I felt very lonely then, self-absorbed, shut off. I needed all this murmured chorus, this continuum of true-life stories, to pull me through. They were like mothers and sisters to me, these literary women, many of them already dead; more than my own family, they seemed to stretch out a hand. (Rose 19)

Seeing first hand this example of the impact of feminist literature shows just how real a woman's power is when she expresses herself and shares her story. There is truly not more of a motive for writing one's story than to know that it is being told to a family of women. Tied in intricate ways to the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the desire for voices previously unheard to come through loudly, the feminist confession and autobiography dominate much of women's literature in the twentieth century.

Feminism and the writing it produces point forward to political emancipation as well as social activity. As we have seen, though, it also

reflects backward toward the inner life "into myth, spirituality, and the transformation of subjective consciousness" (Felski 128). Although feminist writing has been called full of self absorption, these writer's lives are not completely self absorbed; they cannot be, because what each is writing about is commenting on and making a connection with those social and political ideas that she is constantly encompassed and surrounded by. Feminist writing of the late '60s and early '70s crossed national boundaries which have continued through today and will continue in the future. Feminism and its literature became an international movement whose list of members and contributors is truly endless. As pointed out by Greene's *Changing the Story*, "Change is an exciting and often excruciating thing for feminist writers—and a central fact of existence. Feminist writers see their situations as 'uncharted' and use fiction to create a blueprint for the future" (Greene 36). Learning from history and growing from modern experience, feminist writers and their work form expressive change as it reflects and acts upon the self in an often "other" environment.

WORKS CITED

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969.

Belsey, Catherine and Jane Moore. *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989.

Conway, Jill Ker. *Written by Herself*, vol. II. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

Greene, Gayle. *Changing the Story*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Humm, Maggie. *Feminisms: A Reader*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Rose, Phyllis. *The Penguin Book of Women's Lives*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc. 1993.

Schneir, Miriam. *The Vintage Book of Feminism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1929.