

# To Be or Not To Be (a Man): Is That the Question? Men and/in Feminist Literary Criticism

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## Abstract

While the question of men and/in feminism has long been subject to different (and often opposed) views and opinions, the more specific issue of men in feminist literary criticism remains largely unexplored. Nevertheless, the question of men in feminism is not exactly the same as the question of men in feminist literary criticism. As Toril Moi indicates, “while the latter is an interesting and relevant problem in its own right, it is strange, to say the least, not to find a single discussion of the difference between these two questions.” This paper thus sets out to address the particular subject of men and/in feminist literary criticism. While acknowledging the diversities *within* –and disagreements *between*– male and female feminisms, it posits that men can and should get involved in feminist literary theory, arguing that (female) feminism could be widened and enriched by new male feminist critical perspectives.

The subject of men and/in feminism has long been the focus of a controversial (and ongoing) debate within feminist scholarship.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, men’s involvement in feminism has often been looked at with suspicion. Stephen Heath (1987), for example, claims that men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one. In his view, the relation between feminism and men is necessarily one of exclusion, since feminism is a matter for women, it is their voices and actions that must determine the shape and future of feminism. According to Heath (1987), men’s desire to become the subjects of feminism is another

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jardine and Smith (1987); Digby (1998); Gardiner (2002).

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instance of male domination, appropriation, and colonization. Women are the “subjects” of feminism; men are its “objects” (Heath, 1987: 1).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, several feminists are increasingly acknowledging and welcoming men’s participation in the struggle for gender equality, which they consider of outmost importance for several reasons. On the one hand, feminism seeks justice and (gender) equality, so it can and should be embraced by both women and men. As Tom Digby has suggested, “for me, it is as easy to explain why I am a feminist as it is to explain why I am an antiracist, or why I oppose economic injustice. In all three cases, the reason is my belief in the need for equality” (1998: 3). Besides the belief in equality, another fundamental reason for male feminism is the damaging or back-wash effect of patriarchy on men’s own lives.<sup>3</sup> Although it is women who suffer the worst consequences of patriarchy, it also exacts a price on men. For example, patriarchy has traditionally defined men as rational and unemotional. While this conventional definition of masculinity has helped to reaffirm men’s “superior” rationality over women’s emotional (and hence “irrational” and “inferior”) nature, patriarchy has also obliged men to repress their emotional inner selves. As a result, men often remain estranged from the world of nurture and emotions, which are an essential component of *human* life (Seidler, 1994: 1).

While the question of men and/in feminism has thus become subject to different (and often opposed) views and opinions, the more specific issue of men in feminist literary criticism remains largely unexplored. Nevertheless, the question of men in feminism is not exactly the same as the question of men in feminist literary criticism. As Toril Moi indicates, “while the latter is an interesting and relevant problem in its own right, it is strange, to say the least, not to find a single discussion of the difference between these two questions” (1989: 186). It now seems appropriate, therefore, to address the particular subject of men and/in feminist literary criticism, which, like the issue of men in feminism, has raised a particularly controversial –and still open– debate within feminism.

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<sup>2</sup> Other feminist scholars, for example Braidotti (1987), hold a similar view.

<sup>3</sup> While the former reason (belief in gender equality) is an ethical imperative, the latter (detrimental effects of patriarchy on men’s own lives) suggests that feminism, as Michael Kimmel (Carabí and Armengol, 2008) has argued, is necessary for enriching men’s own lives as well as their relationships with women, children, and each other.

Literary hermeneutics has shown how texts are not simply mimetic or reflective: they are not limited to describing real or fictional worlds. Because a text may be differently interpreted by each of its readers, texts produce a multiplicity of meanings and new performances of themselves. In those performances, readers play a central and active part. Thus, reading is an interactive and social act. In our inter-personal reading practices, we have traditionally been addressed as gendered beings and, in general, both women and men have been taught to read as men. While there are some exceptions to the rule,<sup>4</sup> the Western reader has been usually addressed as a man because of three main factors (Knights, 1999: 22): 1) cultural assumptions about knowledge, about gender, and about maturity; 2) the terms of the text itself, especially its power as a discourse, an address that makes proposals about who reads it and according to what basic rules; and 3) institutions of education and reading. Elaborating on this, Ben Knights comments:

The dominant traditions in Western literatures have addressed the reader on the understanding that the normal position was that of being a male [...]. The ideal community of readers with whom any one individual has been invited into solidarity would be made up of men. Reading as a man has thus been proffered to all, whatever their actual gender, as the neutral and universal position from which other positions are deviations. (1999: 22)

Many feminist literary critics have long focused attention on this fact, which they have also tried to question and modify.<sup>5</sup> They have shown how women can become “resisting readers” (Fetterley, 1978) of the patriarchal discourses addressed to them. But, what about men? Can they also become “resisting readers”? Opinions seem to be divided in this respect. Men’s participation in feminist literary criticism has often been considered suspicious. For example, in the autumn of 1984, the Harvard’s Center for Literary Studies created its Feminist Literary Theory Seminar. However, men were specifically not invited to this

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<sup>4</sup> As is known, most of the original readers of the novel were women (Eagleton, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Fetterley (1978); Reid (1989).

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meeting. Some of the founding members, as Boone (1989: 162) has explained, felt that the topic was too sensitive and that the women in the seminar needed to reach a group consensus before opening its doors to men. Similarly, Elaine Showalter's "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year" (1983), the first prominent article on the male feminist critic phenomenon, describes men's participation in feminist literary criticism as an act of intrusion. More specifically, the article denounces the appropriation of feminist criticism by several prominent male literary critics (such as Jonathan Culler, Terry Eagleton, Wayne Booth, and Robert Scholes) eager to benefit from its early successes in the 1980s. Taking up Showalter's views, a number of critics have thus conceded that men's engagement in feminist literary criticism is an impossibility. Robert Scholes, for example, has acknowledged what he sees as men's inevitable estrangement from feminist criticism, claiming that males will never be able to read as women. In his own words:

With the best will in the world we shall never read as women and perhaps not even like women. For me, born where I was born and living where I have lived, the very best I can do is to be conscious of the ground upon which I stand: to read not as but like a man. (1987: 218)

Nevertheless, Scholes's opinions are no doubt open to questioning. First of all, it must be remembered that the history of anti-sexist men may be traced back many years ago. In nineteenth-century America, for example, several men were equally active as anti-sexists and as abolitionists. Among these, one should mention William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Parker Pillsbury, and Samuel Joseph May. Some husbands of suffrage leaders, such as Henry Blackwell, husband of Lucy Stone, and James Mott, husband of Lucretia Mott, were activists for women's rights in their own right as well. The approximately one-third proportion of men happens also to be the percentage of male signatories to the landmark 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. Reclaiming this history is crucial for profeminist men to go on with their work. Moreover, antisexist men have as yet been insufficiently

written into women's history, although the history of profeminist men, as Harry Brod (1987: 49) reminds us, is an essential part of the history of feminism.<sup>6</sup> If, as it seems, men have long participated in the feminist struggle for equality, then it seems logical to deduce that they can and should also take part in feminist literary criticism.

Patriarchal notions of masculinity are constantly being reinforced through social practices of communication, including literature, both oral and written. Nevertheless, fictions are not monolithic but provide some room for play and negotiation, since they are performative and rely on the reader to go on re-inscribing or changing themselves. In other words, there is no such a thing as a text in itself since a text only becomes meaning-ful(l) when it is read. In this sense, then, male readers, as Ben Knights (1999: 23) has concluded, can also learn to read against the dominant assumptions both of texts and of the institutions of reading, interpretation, and criticism.<sup>7</sup> In the end, they could reap benefit from doing so. While it is true that men have usually been the beneficiaries of their textual identification with the universal, such identification may reinforce identities and narratives which, while giving power and privileges to men, reduce and/or distort them in other ways. As a fictional construct, masculinity has often been restricted by the narratives addressed to us. So, men might develop a gender-specific perspective in order to achieve "estranged masculine readings" (Knights, 1999: 23), that is, "readings which –while reflexively conscious of the gender identities of those practising them– do not accept a hegemonic masculinity as an inescapable given" (Knights, 1999: 23).

Certainly, it is often said that men will appropriate feminism; that because men are used to running things, they would take over feminist criticism if given half the chance, their appropriation of it constituting another form of oppression and colonization; and that the academic men who are interested in feminist criticism will soften its radicalism by professionalizing it, transforming it into an optional "approach" to literature and offering it as something both new and relevant to students fed up with traditional approaches. However, all

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<sup>6</sup> See Kimmel and Mosmiller (1992) in this respect.

<sup>7</sup> After all, both women and men have also had to *learn* to read as men. As Knights insists, reading as a man is as "unnatural" for a man as learning to curse or spitting in the street (1999: 23).

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these arguments, as Ruthven (1991: 11) insists (and I would agree), are weakened by the fact that female feminists have *already* collaborated with men on numerous occasions, which has often resulted in societal improvement. For example, female feminists working in socialist and Marxist political parties, struggling against racism and imperialism, fighting dictatorships and mobilizing against nuclear war and ecological disasters have always worked with men. Feminist theory is also indebted to the work of men such as John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Engels, while feminist literary criticism has made extensive use of Michel Foucault's work on sexual and discursive practices, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, and Jacques Lacan's analysis of the links between psychoanalysis and linguistics.

It seems, therefore, that men can play and have played a key role in feminist politics and criticism. Little wonder, then, that a number of recent feminist critical texts, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating's landmark edition of *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), have incorporated male-authored contributions. In her "Preface" to the book, the late Gloria Anzaldúa comments that *This Bridge We Call Home*, published thirty years after *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, remains indebted to the earlier text in terms of both character and structure. However, she elaborates that *This Bridge We Call Home* expands on *This Bridge Called My Back*, giving it a new shape. One of the key differences between the two texts is the gender of the contributors to each volume. While *This Bridge Called My Back* was written exclusively by women of color, *This Bridge We Call Home* incorporates a number of contributions by white males. Anzaldúa acknowledges that, in so doing, the text risks the displeasure of many women of color, who will not want whites or males as contributors to the book. Nevertheless, she is convinced that, although it would have been easier for her to limit the dialogue to women of color, excluding white males from feminist (and ethnic) criticism "comes from woundedness, and stagnates our growth" (2002: 3). It is true that many women of color are possessive of *This Bridge Called My Back* and view it as a safe space, as "home." However, it is equally true, as Anzaldúa insists, that there are no safe spaces. "Home" can be unsafe and dangerous because it is associated with intimacy and thus thinner boundaries. Staying "home" and not moving out from our

own group comes from resentment and proves limiting. “To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others.” As Anzaldúa elaborates:

Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded. Effective bridging comes from knowing when to close ranks to those outside our home, group, community, nation –and when to keep the gates open. (2002: 3)

In Anzaldúa’s view, then, change will decline unless we attach it to new growth or include new growth in it. We thus need to move away from simply focusing on what has been done to the “Other” (victimhood) to a wider level of agency, one that questions what we are doing to each other. This does not entail abandoning previous ideas, but “building on them.” Moreover, to include white males is not an attempt to restore their privilege, but “a refusal to keep walking the color line.” As Anzaldúa elaborates, “whiteness may not be applied to all whites, as some possess women-of-color consciousness, just as some women of color bear white consciousness” (2002: 2). Moreover, to include (profeminist) men in the feminist critical debates may help challenge traditional gender divisions. In her own words, “these inclusions challenge conventional identities and promote more expansive configurations of identities -some of which will soon become cages and have to be dismantled” (2002: 4).

It would appear, then, that (white) men could also widen and enrich feminist (and ethnic) literary studies. Actually, separatist views on feminist criticism seem to remain ignorant about the conditions in which feminist studies operate. Even when written by and specifically for women, feminist criticism is read also by academic men. After all, no literature teacher can afford to ignore feminist contributions to Marxist studies of the institutionalization of literature, particularly the

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indictment of androcentricity that becomes apparent through the dominance of male authors on academic syllabi. One should also try to avoid separatist views on feminist literary criticism because they end up dividing the sexes in such a way that men must either ignore feminism or criticize it. Separatist feminists have argued that men should be discouraged from writing feminist literary criticism for the same reasons that they should be discouraged from teaching in women's literature courses, since having "the oppressor" talk about his oppression to "the oppressed" is morally inappropriate. However, such a view, as Ruthven (1991: 11-12) has concluded, fails to examine the unquestioned identification of men with oppression. Rather than identify men with a universal and unproblematic conception of patriarchy, female feminist critics should encourage men, as Toril Moi (1989: 184) has argued, to incorporate feminism into everything they do and write. In this way, they would contribute to a transformation of society which would put much current feminist polemic to an end.

There exist various areas from which a male feminist criticism might emerge. First of all, young men seem more likely to engage in feminist criticism than older men are. We need to account for an important generational factor, since there are now men in academia young enough for feminism to have been a fundamental component of their intellectual formation. Moreover, we should avoid lumping all men together as a uniform category. We should pay special attention to those marginalized male voices, particularly gay, whose interests often intersect, though do not always coincide, with those of female feminists (Boone, 1989: 174).

While men can and should take part in feminism, male feminism does not and should not always coincide, therefore, with female feminism. Just as it is important to account for the diversity of voices within the feminist movement itself, women and men also need to keep this plurality in mind when considering the possibilities of a male feminist critical activity, its own potential for diversities, differences, and disagreement. After all, male feminists cannot simply repeat the words and actions of female feminists. Speaking as they do from a different position, the "same" words acquire "different meanings." Repeating the words of a female feminist, however honestly, a man signals the fact, as Toril Moi (1989: 184) has skillfully noted, that he has not considered the differences in power –and,



therefore, in speaking position- between them. Male feminists should begin, therefore, to analyze their specific relation to feminism, outlining their own political agendas against patriarchy. While shared by both women and men, feminism might thus be enriched, widened, and redefined by new male perspectives. In other words, male feminist literary criticism is not about more of the same. Rather, it is about the “imagination of difference” that does not separate into two antagonical agendas, but that opens onto a complex “map of contiguities” (Miller, 1987: 141-142).

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