

Between Wars, Between Genders: The Radical Reconstruction of Identity in Interwar Literature

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Abstract:

The present research paper evaluates the radical reconstruction of the gender identity in the Anglophone literature of the interwar period (1918-1939) as the direct outcome of the trauma of the World War I. According to a comparative reading of canonical modernist novels, the paper hypothesizes that identity crisis brought about by the psychological shock of the Great War amalgamated the societal conceptions of masculinity and femininity. By utilizing Trauma Theory and Hegemonic Masculinity, the paper concludes that male authors made their stories revolve around the issue of manhood in the failure of the body, whereas female authors drew their attention to the post-war trauma in psychology and the domestic consequences of shell shock. This trauma discourse helped to unravel rigid forms of gender binarity resulting in a gender fusion as a survival psychological strategy in a social order which was rendered obsolete by modernity.

Keywords: radical reconstruction

1. Introduction: The Trauma and the Text.

The First World War is the landmark of the modern history that left a deep psychological trauma in the path of the human identity that stretched much beyond the battlefield. The era of the 1918-1939 period was full of uncertainty, when the system of the society fell down and people did not know their values and future. The modernist literature turned out to be an essential channel of the investigation of this development, and the novels became the testimony of the system of human relations and personal identities severely affected by the war. The main thesis of this study is that authors manifested the population at a state of confusion in terms of personal and collective identity since the war has deprived the predetermined definition of what it was to be a man or a woman. With the advent of traditional differences colliding, the men were coming back to the war emotionally shattered and without their sense of dominance, and the women were getting a new sense of independence through the working world and they were accessing a common psychological space formerly so divided.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

The Unspeakable Wound

Trauma theory is one of the key instruments to the psychological analysis of the outcomes of industrialized warfare. In her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is intrinsically aversive to narrative cognition and manifests itself in the form of repetitiveness in memories, breaks in narratives and consciousness holes. It is a crucial framework to the interpretation

of discontinuous inner selves of characters in the modernist fiction where irony and fragmentation as stylistic elements is not just a piece of art but also a linguistic mode of traumatic memory.

Hegemonic Masculinity (HM)

Hegemonic Masculinity as a theory created by R.W. Connell reviews the cultural sex ideology which requires physical power and oppression of vulnerability. This ideal was attached to militarism before 1914, with the warrior hero being the supreme social character and the war the ultimate ordeal of manhood. Yet, the psychological cost of this stoic act frequently resulted in loneliness in emotion and inability to emerge out of the war intact psychologically, which resulted in radical identity crises witnessed in the works of such male writers as Hemingway.

The Female Narrative: Domestic Collapse and Fragmented Memory.

The writings of female writers of the interwar period were still obsessed by the psychological aftermath of the war that was widespread, and they followed the fragmentation of memory and the ensuing domestic crises.

The Doubled Self in The Doubled Life of Mrs. Dalloway (1925).

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf explains how the social repression and the war trauma are dependent on each other. As a goal reality of psychic trauma, the character of Septimus Warren Smith is the failure to mourn his fallen officer, a disastrous lack of anticipated male stoicism. Woolf is quite acidic in her criticism of the medical institutions that failed the veterans and depicts doctors that do not bother with the pain of Septimus and order him to conform. Similar to this, Clarissa Dalloway undergoes a trauma of civilian life, structural repression, the pose of emotional detachment and managerial control, traditionally attributed to masculinity, as a survival strategy in order to preserve her social status.

The Return of the Soldier (1918) Amnesia and Authority.

The novel by Rebecca West reveals the problem of shell shock by means of selective amnesia of Christopher Baldry showing the instability of domesticity after the war. The amnesia is a resistance of the soldier to integrate the war horrors into a normal self. The story revolves around this secondary trauma of the women abandoned, especially the moral and rehabilitative power accorded to Margaret Grey. According to West, the therapeutic healing is not in the institutions of bourgeois or military, but in the emotional sincerity of the person who has a quality of resilience in her that the male characters do not have.

Voyage in the Dark (1934) Colonial Dislocation.

Intersectional identity fragmentation is one of the extensions of the definition of interwar trauma offered by Jean Rhys. The trauma of Anna Morgan is an incessant condition of being, caused by her alienation in London through her colonial origin. Rhys uses the lens of gender and race to analyze the split self in that the mental imbalance and the disjointed mind of the protagonist reflect the trauma of the battlefield. According to this approach, trauma of this period was supported by an organized introduction to a capitalist, modernized world where marginalized personalities were always used.

3. Comparison and Contrast: Gendering the Narrative.

The findings of this work point to the fact that the literary style is a gendered response to trauma. Women authors used frequently modernist discontinuity, stream-of-consciousness, and dislocated memory to plunge the reader into the subjectivity of inner life, thus proving the theories of unclaimed experience. The minimalist form of the male writer such as Hemingway on the other hand is a trauma reaction in the form of the repressed control; the surface of the prose is hard and cold as a literary response to the emotional armour worn by the wounded male ego. Although the female writers were tracing the fragmentation of the consciousness through the internalization of the crisis, male writers were tracing the fragmentation of language through the externalization of it, through the various gendered ways of dealing with painful experiences. Moreover, the overall destruction of the ideal of the soldier hero can be confirmed by these readings, which prove that moral and emotional power was transferred to female characters, whose skills of caring and sympathy, traditionally undervalued, turned out to be the key to survival in a post-traumatic world.

4. Conclusion

Compared evaluation would confirm that the interwar period was characterized by gendered identity crisis brought about as a direct result of World War I. The research proves that male authors emphasized the physical signs of crisis, such as impotence or desertion, whereas female authors stressed on the institutional and domestic consequences. This was not a glorification of freedom but a psychological survival strategy, as the gender dichotomy that prevailed before the war was no longer secure due to the presence of androgynous identity in characters such as Catherine Barkley or stoic control in characters such as Clarissa Dalloway. The literature was a very important healing factor against institutional denial, as it rationalized the existence of the invisible wounds and formed the future memory of the historical culture of the Great War on human identity.

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