

French Feminist Awareness

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Abstract: *My intention in producing this study is to provide a compendium of information about women writers and the world they lived in. Space limitations forced me to select only a few. My first decision was to limit the women authors included to those writers who lived and worked mainly in France. In terms of my methodological approach, I asked the reader to focus on the development of a "feminist" consciousness, on each writer's awareness of the ways in which her gender shaped her outlook and her opportunities, and to reflect on the way categorizations, structures, and terms used to describe literary works have been defined for women and the ways in which women writers have responded to these definitions.*

Key words: , French women, French literature, feminism, feminist consciousness

In the seventeenth century, the popular novelist Madeleine de Scudéry lamented the fate of women writers: "Among the infinite number of beautiful women who doubtlessly lived during the centuries preceding our own, we have barely heard of only two or three: and during those same centuries, we can see the glory of men solidly established by the written works they have left us." ¹ We can only say that most of the works of only these few women writers worthy of recognition have been judged by men.

Our current state of historical knowledge allows us to state with some degree of certainty that the earliest known literary productions by women living in Europe were by French women. As far back as the twelfth century, women troubadours in the south of France were writing poems in Occitan, a Gallo-Roman language. French women continued writing through the ages, their number increasing as education became more available to women of all classes. And yet, of the great number of works by women writers who preceded the current feminist movement, very few survived.

"Times have changed," and we can observe that the reclaim of women writers and the rethink of literary history includes them in college and university curricula. Course offerings now include many more women authors and many institutions offer programs in gender and women's studies, under the banner of multiculturalism. The presence of women in administrative positions in institutions of higher education, as department chairs, deans, and presidents, indicates that this subject is more complex than it requires debating.

The twentieth century is a period in which France took part in two world wars, witnessed the independence of most of its colonies, experienced mass immigration, and confronted the internal tensions that arose from the Occupation and the Algerian War. In terms of literary and philosophical movements, the same century moved from surrealism and existentialism through the Nouveau Roman, the Theater of the Absurd, and the Nouvelle Vague to, in recent times, postmodern and postcolonial literature and thought. The twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of large numbers of women writers who have expressed themselves in fictional and nonfictional forms on topics ranging from a questioning of women's role in society to the significance for women of reclaiming voices, bodies, and identities.

In the social and political spheres, a series of important reforms allowed women greater freedom to shape their own lives. In the early part of the century, women were still seeking to affirm their political and civil rights. It was only in 1938 that married women became legal majors; the Constitution of 1946, while guaranteeing women the same rights as men, did not question the unequal position of the married woman in relation to her husband as defined by the Napoleonic Code. While women got the right to vote in 1944, not until 1965

did they have the right to engage in a career or to control their own bank accounts without the consent of their husband.

Significant gains were made in education and the workplace during the twentieth century. In 1900 there were 624 women university students in the whole of France as compared to 27,000 men. With the institution in 1924 of a secondary school program which would be the same for both sexes, the number of women in higher education grew steadily, equaling that of men in 1971 and surpassing it by 70,000 in 1990. In the workplace, women have entered an increasingly large number of professions. As early as 1922, the writer and activist Colette Yver emphasized the difficulties of balancing a career with domestic duties and she expressed her point of view on women's participation in traditionally male-dominated professions, especially science-related fields. Gains made during the interwar period suffered a setback, however, under the Vichy government, which, with its emphasis on family and traditional values, prohibited married women from working in the public sector. While protection for women working outside the home began at the end of the nineteenth century, the most important legislation was introduced after World War II and focused on three main areas: maternity leave, night work, and sexual harassment. Subsequent legislation mandated equal pay for equal work (1972), prohibited gender-based discrimination (1975), and guaranteed equal rights in the workplace (the Roudy law of 1983). However, although women are protected by law, factors related to gender still affect their employment for the most part, women remain concentrated in lower-paying or part-time jobs and benefit from fewer promotions.

In terms of reproductive fights, women were legally prevented from obtaining contraceptives until the passage of the Neuwirth Law in 1967, and from having abortions until new legislation was introduced in 1974 and adopted in its final form in 1980. Early in the century, activists such as Nelly Roussel argued against "forced" maternity, claiming that the government's natalist policies posed a threat to women's autonomy and equality. Subsequently, in reaction to the 1920 law banning the sale of contraceptives, several movements were founded, out of which the *Movement for Family Planning* (1956) and *Choisir* (1971) are two of the most noteworthy. Activists such as Gisèle Halimi, a lawyer and one of the founders of Choisir, played a major role in the struggle for reproductive rights and for increased legal protection against sexual assault. In *La Cause des femmes* (1973), Halimi describes her involvement in the famous Bobigny trial, a case that led to the liberalization of legislation on abortion.

Although literary histories of the early years of the century suggest the relative absence of women writers, an examination of their literary production indicates that a large number of women were actually writing, and points to the patriarchal biases inherent in canon formation. A prominent group of Parisian-based writers raised provocative questions relating to female sexuality; Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, in particular, focused on lesbian identity. Lesser-known writers of the *Belle Époque*, including Louise-Marie Compain, Gabrielle Reval, and Hélène Brion, addressed issues of women's suffrage, labor laws, and pacifism in their essays and treatises, and portrayed independent women in their fictional work. Many of the women writers at this time were still from the middle and upper classes, some depended on male patrons, and either attributed their works to male authorship (as Colette did in her early works), resorted to pseudonyms (Harlor, Rachilde, Gérard d'Houville), or published their works anonymously (the *autobiography of Catherine Pozzi*, for example). In addition, women faced difficulties in the production and distribution of their texts, given that men controlled all aspects of publishing. It was not until 1968 that a woman first owned her own publishing house-when Régine Deforges founded *L'Or du Temps*. The renowned *Editions des femmes* was established in 1973.

The impression of a small number of women writers was reinforced by the literary production of the two world wars – the fact that war writing is a traditionally male genre further contributed to the androcentric canon. Contrary to popular belief, however, women did in fact have much to say about the war. Writers such as Marcelle Tinayre, Marcelle Caby, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and Camille Mayran produced a variety of texts that portray a wide range of positions in relation to the war. As regards World War II, the best-known writers were again male; the role of women has been sorely neglected until recently, both in relation to the World War II Resistance and the Holocaust.

Elsa Triolet, active in the Resistance, was the first woman to receive the *Prix Goncourt*. Her prize-winning collection of short stories, *Le Premier Accroc coûte deux cents francs* (1945), explores the position of women in the Occupation years. Other women who were active members of the Resistance (Marguerite Duras, Clara Malraux, Edith Thomas, and Lucie Aubrac) have described their experiences in memoirs and in fictional form. While Elie Wiesel remains the most well known writer on the Holocaust, women writers, too, evoked the horrors of the camps in a variety of genres: novels (Anna Langfus), autobiographical narratives (Charlotte Delbo, Fania Fénelon), plays (Delbo, Langfus, Liliane Atlan) and poetry (Micheline Maurel). These writers, like their *Belle Époque* counterparts, are currently being revisited as scholars seek to reevaluate the role of women during the two world wars.

Despite the ground-breaking work of numerous early twentieth-century women writers, two women in particular found their way into the canon and deeply influenced later generations of feminists – Colette and Simone de Beauvoir. With her focus on women as subjects of their own desire and her revalorization of the maternal vein, Colette is one of the most important precursors to contemporary feminism. Both her life as a music-hall performer and her literary work raise questions about women's sexuality and their role in society. Unlike Colette, Beauvoir favoured a more intellectual approach with an emphasis on philosophy and sociopolitical issues. Her revolutionary work, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), theorized on the concept of a socially constructed female identity and provided a critical approach of the institution of marriage and the notion of maternity as a woman's biological goal.

The postwar period saw the publication of a series of novels that dealt with gender roles and adolescent sexuality, as the teenager made her appearance on the literary scene. The most acclaimed of these, Françoise Sagan *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954), challenged traditional representations of adolescent love, while *Le Rempart des béguines* (1951, Françoise Mallet-Joris), and *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* (1961, Christiane Rochefort) depicted, respectively, a violent sexual relation between a young girl and an older woman, and the sexual initiation of a young teenager living in a housing project. The works of these and other writers reflected the social and economic changes taking place in the 1950s and 1960s, and analysed in Geneviève Gennari *Le Dossier de la femme* (1965), a historical study that examines the status of women between 1889 and 1964.

The events of May 1968 constitute a central point in regard to the condition of women in the twentieth century. The women's liberation movement (*MLF*) was one of the most significant movements to emerge from 1968. Writers such as Sophie Chauveau have chronicled the consciousness-raising, demonstrations, and general sense of vitality that characterized this period, which witnessed the creation of numerous women's groups - *Féminin et masculin futur*, *Psychanalyse et Politique*, *Féminisme révolutionnaire*, and *Féminisme et Marxisme*, for example. As these groups began to address the different forms of women's oppression, whether social, political or linguistic, a series of journals devoted to women's issues appeared and became a center of intellectual debate – *Questions féministes* (later *Nouvelles Questions féministes*), *F-Magazine* and *Sorcières*, for example.

Sexual difference, one of the most important issues to be raised in the 1970s, was the focus of numerous texts ranging from the highly theoretical to the very popular. Hélène

Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, the three best known theorists of sexual difference, examined this issue in psychoanalytic, philosophical and linguistic terms. Cixous' *Le Rire de la Méduse*, with its emphasis on language, identity, and the body, challenges traditional representations of women. Irigaray's *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (1974) provides a critique of the patriarchal Western philosophic tradition from Plato to Hegel; similarly, Kristeva, in many of her works, associates the feminine with the pre-Oedipal and underscores the revolutionary potential of language.

The question of women's relation to language and the body posed by these theoretical texts reflected in popular works by writers such as Annie Leclerc, Marie Cardinal, and Benoîte Groult. Leclerc's *Parole de femme* (1974), a lyrical exploration of women's bodily experiences, equates giving birth with creating a new language. In *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), Cardinal critically examines the crucial role of language in the construction of female identity, while Groult *Ainsi soit-elle* (1975) focuses on the social construction of identity.

With its focus on thinking and writing "otherwise" and on finding a voice for women, feminism led to an explosion in women's writing in the 1970s that continued through the 1990s. The impact was felt in two main areas: formal experimentation and themes. Building on the earlier work of Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras, writers who had rejected linear narrative structures in order to express previously unexplored emotional states, the *écriture féminine* that emerged in the mid-1970s challenged patriarchal language and traditional forms. This avant-garde experimental style associated with writers such as Hélène Cixous and Chantal Chawaf stressed the corporeality of language and the role of subversive word play. The search for innovative literary forms has recently been expressed in the poetry of Anne-Marie Albiach and Marie Etienne, for example, whose work is often characterized by minimalism and typographical experimentation. Women also sought to convey the female experience through revisionist mythmaking strategies (Cixous, Michèle Sarde) and the reworking of the structures and themes of fairy tales and legends (Pierrette Fleutiaux, Sylvie Germain, Marie Redonnet).

Both the experimental and the more conventionally written texts have given voice to women's concerns on the thematic level. In addition to the permanent focus on the body expressed through the themes of aging, maternity, menstruation, and sexuality, these works also explore the social dimensions of issues relating to abortion (Annie Ernaux); incest (Christine Angot), mother-daughter relations (Dominique Rolin), and madness (Jeanne Hyvrard), thus receiving increased attention. In the theater, an unprecedented number of women playwrights are staging works related to women's lives, in particular mother-daughter relationships (Denise Chalem), surrogate motherhood (Denise Bonal), and marriage (Josiane Balasko). In these texts as well as in others, women writers are examining the complex criss-crossings of race, class, and gender. At the same time, more new voices continue to emerge, suggesting paths to be followed in the future. In particular, writers of immigrant descent are examining issues related to immigration, integration, and racism, and especially their implications for women from diverse cultural traditions (Farida Belghoul, Calixthe Beyala, Kim Lefèvre, and Leïla Sebbar, for example).

As the century draws to a close, women's literary production continues to branch out in new directions and to raise important questions for the future.

Note

[1] Madeleine de Scudéry, quoted in Faith E. Beasley, *Revising Memory: Women's Fiction and Memoirs in Seventeenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 55.

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