



When Women Write Back: Stories of Voice, Power, and Resistance

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Abstract: Women empowerment is predicated on women being able to express themselves orally, in writing, and through their choices about how to define their existence. Historically, women's voices were silenced by patriarchy. For thousands of years, women were depicted in narratives created by men, simply as passive and dependent upon the male character of the story. In writing and narrating their own life experiences, female authors are taking control of their own narratives rather than allowing somebody else to dictate what their stories should say. Women use writing as a way to overcome the bias and oppression they experience and also to assert their individuality by re-establishing who they really are.

Women's narratives have evolved in literature as well. In historical literature, women were often depicted as victims of their circumstances and the result of societal influences and beliefs. However, modern authors present their female characters as clever individuals who possess unique capabilities and strengths that allow them more control over their destiny within the story. Consequently, in contemporary literature, the focus has shifted from depicting women primarily as passive beings who merely survive to being more active agents within the narratives of their stories. "The Handmaids Tale" by Margaret Atwood demonstrates this shift through the use of a woman's story as her own personal story and experiences to counter an existing Patriarchal society. Malala Yousafzai has shown on a global level the power of a single woman's story and how it can influence change and create a movement; the story of her life has changed how women view themselves – no longer as a passive object but as a powerful force for change globally. As technology continues to evolve women today are finding ways to empower themselves further.

Keywords: *Women empowerment, self- expression, social change, female voice, patriarchy*

Introduction

To empower women is to allow them the power and confidence to express themselves and to have no restrictions on how they express themselves. The most common mode of expression is verbal but, more importantly, should also be able to include the emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects of their lives. The positive self-expression of one's desire and interests is what ultimately enables a woman to develop and enhance her identity. By providing a venue through which women can articulate their thoughts, feelings, views and experiences etc, the very essence of empowerment is realised. This presentation will show how women should use storytelling and creative forms of expression such as literature to develop their self-worth and reclaim their power and identity.

Historical Silencing of Women

For many years, patriarchal oppression has specifically oppressed the voices of women by shaping social, political, and cultural narratives almost wholly through Male perspectives. The majority of written records of women's experiences, stories, and identities were recorded through men throughout time, resulting in a "literary canon" that emphasizes or illustrates male authority, rather than the actual experiences of females. Because women lacked institutional power, they had limited opportunities to represent themselves in their own words or express their respective truths in literature. Consequently, female characters in many traditional literary works have been presented as one-dimensional or stereotyped. Women were often depicted as passive, weak, emotionally dependent, or confined to the home, all of which reinforced the idea that women do not possess the ability to be independent, to think for themselves, or to have any form of autonomy. Such representations implied that women lack the capability of independent thought or self-expression and cannot narrate their own stories. Thus, the exclusion of women's voices from literature has contributed to the ongoing oppression of women and to the maintenance of gender inequity throughout history. By encouraging male authors to write from their own perspectives, literature has aided in the maintenance of the belief system that supports the victimization of women in our society and sustains false representations of women.

Writing as a tool of Empowerment

Using writing as a means of empowerment and self-realization, women have gained a measure of control over their lives. Writing allows women to offset the definitions assigned to them by a patriarchal society and determine who, they want to be for themselves. Women's writing, through the means of narrative, has allowed many women to take their power back by challenging systems of abuse, revealing injustices in society and developing their identity as an individual. As such, writing serves not only as a method of self-worth and empowerment; but also as a way to counteract gender role concept and establish an independent identity for themselves.

Women in Historical Literature

Characterizations of women within history have primarily characterized women as victims existing within male-dominated, socially constructed and controlled, environments, rather than as independent beings with the ability to determine their own destinies. The definitions and social roles associated with women were created based on strict societal, cultural and gender definitions as to how women should think, behave and live. This resulted in women having little or no ability to control their own direction, meaning their lives and the actions that occurred in them were largely dictated by external forces rather than personal choice, significantly enhancing the perception that women lack the power over themselves and their lives. A further reflection of this imbalance of power is represented through literature. Within historical literature, women are frequently represented as victims, shaped by their physical environment-nature, social structure, or male authority. The portrayal of women in literature is that of passive beings moulded by their physical environment and not as active agents who can create their own destinies. Literature provides a vehicle for portraying women as being formed by either nature or society, and in doing so, reinforcing and providing justification for gender roles based on limiting beliefs about women and normalizing male-dominance, and rendering gender-inequality as a normal or natural occurrence instead of a social construction. Such characterizations represent a significant curtailment to the range of women's agency and power, support stereotypes of women being incapable of possessing control, independence or influence over their own lives and when further compounded by these representations of women will continue to reinforce the negative perceptions of the greater society towards women.

Evolution of Women's Narratives

Women's literature has evolved considerably over the years, today modern writers portray many female protagonists as strong-willed, fearless competent thinkers who have the ability to determine their own fates rather than simply reacting to events around them. This has resulted in female characters being perceived as independent and empowered individuals, able to direct their lives through the exercise of their own power. Women's portrayals reflect a larger cultural movement toward greater equality for women and their empowerment in society.

Literature as Resistance – The Handmaid's Tale

Women's stories are used to undermine patriarchal society in Margaret Atwood's – *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood uses the main characters relationship to her body to portray the atmosphere created when women are totally controlled. Atwood then creates a female voice through which women can negate their oppression by telling their own stories of survival, thereby affirming their existence as independent beings in a male – dominated society. The story shows the power of women's voices as both a means of political expression and a means of social resistance.

Global and Modern Empowerment

Malala Yousafzai's biography illustrates how one voice of a woman can impact the world as a whole. Malala spoke out about her experience with suffering because she has lived through what many women are suffering due to lack of education for girls, this created an opportunity for her to begin raising the awareness of this issue and motivating others to take action on a global level. The courage that Malala displayed in standing up for what she believes in, even in situations that could have resulted in her death, speaks to how an individual story can create an environment where individuals work together to create a significant social change. Through Malala's story, the perception of women has shifted from simply being the victims of their circumstances to now being transformative agents who have the ability to affect the public dialogue and public policy on a global basis. This change in perception continues to strengthen with the growth of technology in today's society. The increase in technology has allowed women to utilize the capabilities of digital platforms, such as social media, blogs, podcasts and online publications to share their experiences, advocate for their rights and connect with individuals worldwide without regard to culture or geographical locations. Digital platforms allow women to break down stereotypes, provide a voice to those who do not have one and create networks of support to empower other women. Therefore, women today, have opportunities like never before to impact social attitudes, organize movements and declare their identities, providing evidence that self-expression is a powerful tool in achieving global empowerment and equality.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment can be expressed via their personal expression and control over their own life story. For centuries, women have been oppressed by patriarchal society and labelled "passive" outside literature as well as in. Women have been able to break out of this oppression model and recreate their identity through writing, storytelling and all forms of self-expression. The evolution of women's literary imagery — from being passive receivers to being actively involved in effecting social change — is indicative of a much larger movement toward equality between sexes. Texts (like **The Handmaid's Tale**) and biographies (like Malala Yousafzai) illustrate how women can reclaim their voice through modern technology and, as such, the use of modern technology is allowing the continued exploration of women's empowerment through their choice of self-expression and ultimately, continued efforts towards achieving empowerment and social justice.

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