

The Gender of the Artist: Some Positions in the Debate on Creativity

DAVEES C.J.

Feminism, with all its cultural and ideological versions, ultimately reaches out to assert and reclaim creativity for the female as creativity is the supreme site of male/female polemics and its accessibility or availability is determined primarily by gender. That the consciousness is gendered (and gender-biased) seems not much doubted among writers and critics whose chief preoccupation is the question of artistic creativity. However, tradition seems to have ascribed specific gender roles to the male and the female. For instance, in western culture, the male was supposed to be masculine, active, assertive, analytical, healthy, etc., while the female, feminine, submissive, dependent, self-effacing, tender, etc. (Warren 1973: 1). Patriarchal society also takes it for granted that the male is the creator and the female 'his' creature. Thus, an uncritical acceptance of tradition perpetuated the male prevalence and supremacy in artistic creativity, whereby the female was naturally assumed to be positioned somewhere between his creation and muse. Consequently, for the female to establish her gender in the 'subject' position in the creative field has required a coercion and the assertion of a difference in terms of sex/gender. Therefore, a re-viewing of the historically informed gender-conscious perspectives on creativity becomes necessary to launch a critique of the existing literary practices and genres, widening, thereby, the scope of 'literariness' to explore areas hitherto marginalised.

What is attempted below is only a juxtaposition of some of the most remarkable claims and counter-claims noticeable generally in Western culture with regard to artistic creativity. This may provide, I assume, some useful trajectories for researchers in the field either to test them directly in the texts from Western culture, or in the case of scholars from cultures other than the West, to use them as welcome provocations to examine the positions in their own traditions and milieux. Some of these issues, discussed in the following pages, are centered around gender

Davees C.J. is a Lecturer in the Department of English, St. Thomas College, Trichur, Kerala 680 001, India.

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acquisition, growth, sexual-textual pleasure, purgation, reader's pleasure and mythical authentication.

The first major contention in the poetics of creativity deals with the gendering of the artist. In the androcentric view, the artist is traditionally male. Edgar Allen Poe, for instance, in his *Eureka* (1848), compares the artistic activity to God's creation, by which it is implied that the male creates and names things out of nothing, without the partnership of woman. Through 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), Poe further confirms this view by creating Roderick Usher who, as a prototype of the artist-as-God, affects Madeline, who submits herself to him passively (Beebe 1964: 122). William Faulkner, too, through his works like *Mosquitoes* (1927) is said to maintain that the cosmic impulse of the feminine/female is subdued by the male artist in his act of re-creation (Johnson 1989: 5). However, to suit the idea of the exalted position of the ivory tower artist and also to accommodate the life of a materially unsuccessful creator, the 19th–20th century archetype of the artist is defined in terms of femininity in impulses, as for example, by James Joyce, in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915). Originally a male-dominated genre, *Bildungsroman* itself pictures its protagonist as 'meek' (Lukacs 1968[1947]: 59), 'subjective' (Pascal 1965[1956]: 29) or 'inner-directed' (Buckley 1974: 15). Such 'feminine' traits are also attributed, as distinguishable characteristics, to the hero of *Künstlerroman*, a sub-genre of *Bildungsroman* (Beebe 1964: 7). In the words of Lee T. Lemon, 'the unusually sensitive hero' is almost synonymous with an 'intellectually gifted one' (1971: 10–11). The tradition of artistic activity thus marginalises woman and reserves the creative space exclusively for the male observer with a subjective orientation.

Rejecting this male domination in the creative field, Susan Gubar (1985) interprets the 'blankness' of the artist-heroine of Isak Dinesen's short story 'The Blank Page' (1957) as a creative space with the richer-than-male possibilities. The female creator is not only superior to the male, but has, in contrast to the traits of the male artist, attributes which are basically masculine (Huf 1983: 4). Even (the actual) women-artists are not deemed essentially different from this aspect, as John Quinn's work on nine Irish women writers seems to assert (1986: xiv). But this gender reversal is not without purpose, for, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims, it serves to disrupt the male-generic expectation of female text, and to effect, eventually, a new sequence of textuality (1985: 32). According to this feminist stand, the female artist is conceived as the authentic creator potentially superior to the male.

There are also critics who think in the humanistic way, that a gifted mind is neither exclusively masculine nor relentlessly feminine, but a right coalescence of these two in a state of androgyny. This view was 'mothered' by Virginia Woolf, though hers was only a reaffirmation of the initial Coleridgean statement that a great mind is always an androgynous one (Warren 1973: 4). Barbara Warren thinks that the best

means to achieve the Beauvoirean subject-position of the Other is to adopt the Jungian individuation process of consciously acquiring an androgynous combination between the male principle Logos, and the female, Eros (ibid.: 2–3). However, those feminists who regard the idea of balancing as apolitical advocate a female kind of androgyny, an overdose of femininity in terms of a ‘fundamentally undefinable nature’ in order to disallow a phallogocentric aggression into the female gender identity (Moi 1985: 14). But androgyny seems to stay on with a version of *doppelgänger*, a term sometimes used to indicate the personality of the artist, especially the kind of divided Self who creates in an inspired manner but in detachment (Beebe 1964: 13). But the *doppelgänger* of a female artist combines the polarities of angel and monster and becomes, according to feminists, a strategy engaged in ‘deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature’ (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 76). Thus, even the reconciliatory principle of androgyny turns out, in a sexually motivated revision, to be a point of departure and contention.

The next major issue in the creative field deals with the possibilities of growth of the artist. The question of growth-possibility is usually confronted in psychology through the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex which, however, is interpreted as a male privilege. Freud identified it as the child’s first sexual impulses of love for the mother and hatred for the father, which has to be resolved if the child has to grow without psychological barriers (1938[1900]: 308), while Jung thinks that a person’s cultural development is possible only when he is able to renounce all the pleasurable, individual desires associated with the experience of mother’s love (1938[1914]: 974). This means that development presupposes the Oedipal knot which can be resolved, according to Lacan, only by the child’s acquisition of a father’s language; in other words, through the Symbolic Order (Tong 1989: 222). The female, who falls outside this experience, abandons the fixation only incompletely (Freud 1933: 177) and is neither able to rediscover the pleasure of possessing the opposite sex (Reber 1985: 177), nor to effect psychic mechanism of splitting/synthesising, necessary for artistic creation (Mahlendorf 1985: 205, 210). Moreover, as Maurice Beebe asserts, since the artistic life conflicts with the female’s duties as wife and mother, her call to art, if any, should be sacrificed (1964: 86). In short, disruption is generally unwelcome as a threat to the ‘essential American attitude of pragmatic acceptance’ of the existing order (Holman 1979: 194). Thus, through a coercive rhetoric, the possibility of artistic growth is cleverly reserved for the male.

Countering the male dominion in prescribing the nature of artistic growth in favour of the male, feminist works such as Patricia Meyer Spacks’s *The Female Imagination* (1975), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Linda Huf’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (1983) and Elizabeth Abel, Marine Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland’s *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983)

assert the female difference of artistic growth to be essentially non-Oedipal (Abel et al. 1983: 9). As Grace Stewart argues, becoming a woman invariably means 'assuming the sex of her mother' (1981: 42). The feminists now pay attention to the pre-Oedipal stage, technically termed by Lacan as the Mirror stage (first 6 to 8 months) in which the child identifies himself/herself undifferentiatedly with the mother and other objects (Moi 1985: 100). Though Lacan thinks that a fixation of the child in this stage would reduce him/her to be a psychotic (Lemaire 1977[1976]: 78), Hélène Cixous claims that a re-living of the Mirror stage of the daughter–mother relationship allows the woman to be awakened into the creative field of the imaginary, in opposition to the male symbolic order of Oedipal structure (Moi 1985: 117). In this sense, as Luce Irigaray maintains, the female has always a ready access to the growth-possibility, since she is not ever bound by the Oedipal knot (Tong 1989: 224). As even a few male critics admit, unlike the male, the woman, instead of awaiting the opposite sex to initiate her into artistic realisation (Waller 1989), strikes a different *Bildung* (growth) (Suleiman 1983: 226) or 'a counter dynamic' (Brooks 1984: 39). In this manner, not only is the male growth structure challenged, but also the female texts supposedly disrupt a male-centred tradition of literary production (Ezell 1990: 581). In the feminist ingenuity, the female seems to have regained the possibility of artistic growth which is now interpreted to be of a superior kind to that of the male.

Another important issue in the speculations on artistic creativity argues for the sexual-textual pleasure in favour of one sex, while it is denied to the other. Taking Joyce's own case—since he is considered the prototype of the modern male artist—his *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) which are regarded as the ideological continuities of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915) are said to be deploying an economy of male sexual-textual pleasure. The Joycean artist, who exists between Stephen Dedalus (the priest of imagination) and Shem (the self-indulgent 'sham') (Pinsker 1974: 406), and who engages his textual pleasure fully in the abstruse *Wake* (Benstock 1977: 33), is only a disguise of the author, who, according to a literary psychologist, by employing 'parody, wit and word games', fulfils an act of revenge against the world which he thinks has always cheated him (Edel 1982: 93). This strategy appears to be common to many 20th century writers like Proust, Beckett, Lacan, Blanchot (Gunn 1988: 6) and Thomas Mann (Daemmrich 1977: 177). The male textual pleasure is also sexually motivated since the male artist is said to be projecting his erotic urges towards art rather than towards woman (Johnson 1989: 1–2). The male artist's sexual-textual pleasure, then, as Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) suggests, is something that can never be fully shared with the female (Beebe 1964: 110). This pleasure, in the order of prose, history, single voice and heroic body, is also said to be bearing a definite structure of beginning, middle and end (Brooks 1984:

40). The male artist enjoys an indisputable access to this pleasure while the female is denied any easy entry into the same field.

If the male's textual desire is a substitution for his sexual desire for woman, the female's sexual-textual pleasure is claimed to be consisting in a desire for 'many' or 'children'. For instance, Kay Boyle's artist-novel *My Next Bride* (1934) is said to be countering Joyce's 'isolation', by an interest in 'the nurturant social role' (Morse 1988: 342) and the fate of humanity (Spanier 1988: 252). Woolf herself is seen interested in 'the people' and 'the mass' rather than the 'I' of the male writer (Beer 1987: 88). To Hélène Cixous, the capitalist possessiveness of the male should be contrasted with the female's orientation towards life, birth, pleasure and nurturance (Jones 1985: 90). In short, the female artist's pleasure-economy (*jouissance*) can be termed as 'matrisexuality' (Gubar 1983: 39). The text, written with female 'body—the 'desire's prime site' (Gunn 1988: 3)—assumes the *jouissance*, metaphorically, in the words of Irigaray, through her 'sex organs just about everywhere', or in the words of Cixous, her 'desire for swollen belly' (cited in Jones 1985: 89–90) which arrays the female text with openness and 'fragmentation' (Kemp 1990: 100). The female text, thus, bears the properties of say music (DuPlessis 1985: 100) and dance that transcend regulated space (Nicholls 1991: 9), sets legend against male history (Winnett 1990: 515), duration against closure (Jones 1985: 36), broken sequence against traditional plot (DuPlessis 1985: 31), disruptive writing in blood (*ibid.*: 92) and even a silent resistance by writing with 'no blood' (Gubar 1985: 296). Through such a multivoiced desire or 'infinite' (Roudiez 1987[1981]: 16) of motherhood in writing, as Julia Kristeva thinks, the female can achieve a semiotic/textual liberation (Jones 1985: 87). Female pleasure is thus defined with categories supposedly available only to the woman-artist and not to the male artist.

In this context, it is important to take note of how the reader's pleasure too is sexually disputed. One of the major textual intentions of the Bildungsroman, which is also the original form of Künstlerroman, is said to be of the reader's transformation (Miles 1974: 991). But the traditional plot of a growth-novel is conceived in such a way that, as W.H. Bruford suggests, only a male reader is benefited by a plot in which the male hero realises his world-view by dismissing woman after woman for the sake of gaining varied experiences from love as well as the world (cited in Lal 1986: 52). The pleasure of the reader of texts such as this can be comprehended from the perspective of Poe's Biblical analogy of author-text-reader nexus as God-Creation-Adam relationship (Beebe 1964: 118–20). In the male-centred system, the male reader/receiver (Adam) has the privilege over woman (Eve) in 'naming' the texts/creatures (Ruthven 1984: 3). The reading pleasure of the receiver is, thus, a partaking of a 'homoaesthetic', in the sense that a work of art is not only built on the 'feminine' in the male writer (his concept of woman), but is also addressed

to the feminine in the male reader. That is to say, the reading pleasure is ultimately a prerogative of the male sex.

However, the male text is dismissed by the feminist-conscious women as painstaking, as something similar to what K.K. Ruthven realises in his female students' precarious situation in which they are forced to attend his lecture on feminism: for, they felt they were 'having the oppressor lecture on his oppression to the oppressed' (1984: 12). To the women who once complained that the existing systems have fathers but not mothers (Rigney 1978: 3), the genre of growth-novels is presented as re-defined in terms of female Bildungsroman and female Künstlerroman, which are addressed by women and are for women. According to Susan Winnett, the two pioneering studies on the genre (Abel et al. 1983 and Huf 1983) confirm that female texts abound, but one simply has to learn how to read them (1990: 515). The reading pleasure of these texts is, however, as Susan Gubar claims, reserved for the females because the production and reception of these 'blank sheets' involve a communion among, what she calls, 'the sisterhood' (1985: 306). So the female pleasure in the author-text-reader relationship turns out to be a 'gyno-aesthetic' or 'lesbianism' which is characterised by a partaking of the images of women, refusal to be linear in narration and a critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions such as marriage and family (Smith 1985: 9). The female reader is thus privileged over the male with regard to the reading pleasure of 'her stories'.

Next to pleasure, another important area of contention is the idea of art as purgation. Beginning with the concept of the Aristotelian catharsis, purgation of psychic energy through artwork is generally understood to be a healthy function in a creative person. For instance, Goethe, who struggled to resist from killing himself with a dagger, is said to have overcome the impulse by writing *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Beebe 1964: 30). Similarly, Charles Dickens had exorcised his shameful past through his works (ibid.: 89) and according to Seymour Betsky, '*Sons and Lovers* is a purgation become the successful work of art' (cited in Beebe 1964: 113). Moreover, suicide for geniuses like Hemingway is claimed to be 'the focus of manhood' (Kriegel 1979: 97). This kind of creative perversion, as Faulkner reportedly upholds, is only a male preserve, since only the male has the freedom to make a choice in *acting*, while the female, to be creative, has to be *born* perverted (Johnson 1989: 5-6). In this sense, a female growth-novel is bound to be an anti-Bildungsroman (Ruthven 1984: 120-21). Consequently, Mahlendorf takes up a few female Künstlerroman for analysis only because she wants to pry into how artistic creation can be frustrated (1985: xviii). The female, thus, is barred from having access to creative perversion (madness/suicide) and purgation.

Opposing this male stand, the feminists ask how that which is considered to be desirable and normal for the male is interpreted to be neurotic and psychotic for woman. Phyllis Chesler, therefore, views female madness

as a normal female condition, a 'divinely menacing behaviour' from which society tries to protect itself through force (1972: xx). According to Barbara Hill Rigney, madness in a female's life implies her search for a special potency (1978: 6), and R.D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience* (1967) maintains that a female's perversion is only 'a special strategy' employed by her to confront the threatening situation in society (cited in Rigney 1978: 8). Quite as an illustrative point, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin argues that Zelda Fitzgerald's arduous training in ballet as well as her artist-novel, *Save Me the Waltz* (1932), are creations alternative to her own nervous collapse, which together with her 'neurosis' should be taken as Zelda's artistic search in response to her husband Scott Fitzgerald's continuous nagging and their marital unhappiness (1979: 30). Female perversion (suicide/madness) is thus interpreted by feminists as woman's artistic strategy and a response to the oppressive male world.

A sixth contention is identifiable with the male-female combat for authenticating their creativity through respective myths. The result is a sexual demarcation of initiation myths/archetypes into male and female. Maurice Beebe, who presents the first detailed study of the artist in fiction, gives special emphasis to Goethe, Joyce and 'artist as hero' in his very title, and declares that the Joycean version of the artist structured on the Daedalus/Icarus myth is the ultimate pattern of artistic realisation. With his division of artistic mind into Sacred Fount (sex and life experience) and Ivory Tower (inspiration and detachment), Beebe's archetype of the artist also seems to subsume other similar myths of artists such as Faust and Prometheus. Beebe, however, maintains that, with Joyce, the archetype of the artist is firmly established (Beebe 1964: 299). Similar to the Joycean pattern of conflicts and exile, Joseph Campbell draws the major elements of (artistic) initiation from various myths like the Road of Trials, the Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, the Ultimate Boon and the Departure of the Hero. Campbell presents us with a 'Hero [and not a Heroine] with Thousand Faces', whose fulfilment is marked by the possession of a woman, thereby attaining the envious position of his father (Campbell 1968[1949]: 121). At this juncture, 'the male phallus, instead of the female breast, is made the central point (*axis mundi*) of the imagination' of the hero (ibid.: 138). The development and the realisation of the artist-hero through conflicts with society, the resultant exile and possession of woman, are thus presented as being legitimated through ageless myths.

Kate Millett identifies, in these patriarchal myths, a sexual bias and a female segregation. According to her, the male initiation sites of the House of Melanesia, the Samurai order and the Greek gymnasium, and the two leading myths of the Western culture, namely, the Pandora's box and the Fall—all denigrate the female sex either by adopting a male homosexuality to do away with women, or by charging the women possessed by men to be the cause of male sin and punishment (Millett 1970[1969]:

46–54). Attempting to substitute male myths by female ones, Phyllis Chesler discusses the cases of four psychologically disturbed women—Mrs. Elizabeth Packard, Mrs. Ellen Wet, Mrs. Zelda Fitzgerald and Mrs. Sylvia Plath Hughes—in terms of Demeter and her four daughters, Persephone, Psyche, Athena and Artemis (1972: xiv). Grace Stewart, through her study of female myths, rejects the mythical pattern of artistic life represented by Daedalus, Icarus, Prometheus and Faust, since they are insufficient to explain the womanly role of motherhood (which implies more female creativity and matrisexuality than biological motherhood—the motherhood ‘of selfless involvement with and connection to others’—and she substitutes them by a woman-centred Demeter/Persephone configuration (1981: 14). Susan Gubar, too, dismisses Pygmalion’s phallic siege of artistic story/creativity and, instead, interprets the voiced silence of the ‘Blank Sheets’ as the central female archetype of artistic expression (1985: 292). According to Linda Huf, artist-heroines who assume legendary and mythical names like Thea, Edna, Avis, Esther and the like, grow to become artists through a general pattern of assertiveness, conflict between marriage and vocation, presence of a female foil and absence of a male muse (1983: 8). The female artist’s growth and realisation are thus authenticated through myths opposed to the male-centred ones.

Do the male artist and the female artist (in fiction), who have been the central objects of analysis in this discussion, include the male and the female in general, as for instance the black male and the black female? In 1983, Linda Huf stated that ‘the black woman artist is a missing character in fiction’ (1983: 14). In 1989, interestingly enough, a Ph.D. dissertation was written on ‘The Creative Black Women in Toni Morrison’s Novels’ by making use of, primarily, the theme of emergent woman by Alice Walker (Deo 1989). However, there are other reasons to be suspicious of the gender dichotomy. The realist feminist position of Eve Sedgwick holds that the sexual or gender difference between the oppressor (presumably male, but not always so) and the oppressed (presumably female, but not always so) cannot be perfectly demarcated (1989: 55). Moreover, the contemporary metaphysical position of the postmodern ideology refuses to offer any cultural diversity separate to masculinity and femininity (Eashtope 1989: 9). The man/woman dichotomy thus becomes, according to Julia Kristeva, a notion of fluidity in a time when the very concept of identity is questioned (Moi 1985: 12–13). This thought pattern which refuses to admit the very existence of disparities may itself seem to be a mere display of intellectualism and rhetoric, since the consciousness of sexual dichotomy continues to produce an immense volume of (male and female) artist-novels with high aesthetic values. This is particularly true of the cultural spaces which have either not been admitted in or to have overridden the postmodern culture. At the same time, the postmodern experience of gender, growth, pleasure, pain and (mis)use of myth invites one to do serious research that, if conducted through a sexually

comparative framework (radical comparativism) might divide even the postmodern artist into male and female. In addition, an examination of creativity issues in terms of sexual difference in black and commonwealth/postcolonial fiction awaits future study that will not only enlighten one on the nature of the particular black and commonwealth/postcolonial artistic consciousness, differently for man and woman perhaps, but more importantly, may even help the black and commonwealth/postcolonial feminist to draw new emancipatory boundaries for their female artists.

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