Female Subject and (De)Construction of Identity: A Comparative Case Study

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ABSTRACT: In recent literary theory there are different kinds of arguments concerning the way the language of fiction can be analyzed with the aim of the construction (and/or deconstruction) of identity. The trend known as Poststructuralist French Feminism includes its variety of suggestions to reflect and study women's challenging relationship with this language and attempts to analyze female unconscious reflected in a possible alternative discourse. To study the points raised within the practice and to see how they function in different works, two short stories by contemporary authors, one Iranian (Sepideh Shamlou, 2001) and the other British (Angela Huth, 1991) will be compared here. The study uses parts of the methodology, guidelines and critical suggestions introduced by Poststructuralist Feminism mainly; it aims to show how the writers echo the identity of two women facing very similar problems in two different cultures. Finally, it concludes how each protagonist confronts her own femininity and tries to find her unique way of giving voice to what cannot be stated within the dominant discourse, thus constant deconstruction of the pre-given identity can be traced in the works.

Keywords: female subject, identity, poststructuralist feminism, Sepideh Shamlou, Anna Huth.

Introduction: a Short History for the “Subject” and the “Other”
Among various trends in today’s literary theory, the ones that have affinities with (or are influenced by) psychoanalytic-oriented critical practices, deal with the ways in which an individual’s identity is stated in the fictional works. In these practices, specifically, it is argued that language dominates sensory perceptions; it is through language that the subject is able to learn the structures of society and internalize them (Green & Lébihan, 1996). That is why a great number of theorists try to show how the speakers that are regarded as the minority, such as, the colonized, ethnic groups or women have tried to emancipate language from the constraints of syntactical formality of its standardized form.

Challenging the concepts of female identity suggested by the dominant disciplines dealing with the psychoanalytic study of the “Subject”, Poststructuralist French Feminists undertake to question the position of
“the Other” suggested by Freudian and Lacanian literary critics. Freud’s discussions imply that in the process of formation of gender identity, since the female subject cannot identify with the phallic symbol, and its masculine power, it gains its identity “outside” this realm. The French psychoanalyst and theoretician, Jacques Lacan, developed and complicated some aspects of Freud’s theory through his more philosophical discussions and abstract reformulations (Green & LeBihan, 1996). He actually considered female subject as physically and metaphorically known outside language -- or any significant cultural structure; and therefore, it is only appropriate in this model to regard her as “The Other”, outside the realm of the language.

On the other hand, different trends of poststructuralist thought, especially those with feminist inclinations, questioned some of these taken-for-granted formulations. Luce Irigaray (2004) as the dedicated inheritor of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist critics, keeps her independence by making sure she stands against its implied stereotype of woman as invisible and irrational. She is an advocate of gaining self-consciousness on the part of women in a world that is dominated by male-centered concepts. She tries to illustrate how the Symbolic Discourse objectifies the world. Irigaray further refers to the lack of “an interpretive key” which may open new perspectives: “the lack of any existing relationship with the other which respects his or her difference(s)” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 67). She explicitly states that "now, the subjectivity of a man is structured by differentiating himself from the Mother Nature; it is constructed to a great extent not only in spite of her but against her” (p. 68).

Helene Cixous (1997), another poststructuralist feminist critic, proposed the emphasis on the difference between male and female unconscious and suggested studies based on the presupposition of an “écriture féminine” (female writing) the framework of which is specified by her. The discussions in the field and the contributions to the thought are too numerous to be all reviewed here.

Female Subject as Represented by Short Stories
The present study compares two stories, one written by an Iranian writer and the other by an English writer. The former is called “Red Gloves” by Sepideh Shamlou (2001); and, the latter is “Weighing Up” by Angela Huth (1991). In both stories the protagonist is a woman, each one is busy dealing with the problems of her subject position threatened by her male partner. Despite the fact that the writers of the two stories reflect very different cultures and the stories have their own unique background, there are some striking similarities that may suggest the affinities that can be created as a result of the common grounds discussed above. Let us first have a look at the plot summary of both stories.
Beside a fireplace, a young woman, Matin, is waiting for a fortune teller to come. She is carefully and even obsessively preparing herself to be a perfect hostess (making tea and coffee, setting the table…). She is supposed to be accompanied by others, but she has accepted to pay for two so that she is alone with the fortune teller. On arrival, the fortune teller recognizes the narrator as an old school mate, but Matin escapes and denies any acquaintance. Instead, she emphatically wants to know her fortune and see whether her fiancé is going to marry her. The fortune teller, mentions a marriage, something or someone who is expected to leave the narrator's life and gives the name of a future husband -- not the same as the fiancé's. The narrator constantly thinks of the man, and the fortune teller, ironically, gives her some very concrete and realistic advice on how this might not work for her, that she may even fail in the present engagement. She tells Matin to be more careful at least with the small things around: the food seems to be burning while they are speaking. The narrator keeps denying and evading, even when this old school friend reminds her of their childhood, when Matin used to lose things and blame today's fortune teller for that. The fortune teller confesses she had been so dissatisfied with this that she once really took Matin's red gloves. She then leaves Matin alone; it is cold.

The second story is “Weighing Up” by Angela Huth. A middle-aged woman is narrating the recent years of her life; she reminds herself that her husband is on business trips most of the times and her children have left home for college one after the other. She says she is satisfied with her life; she thinks of her husband most of the time and how they have managed to have a perfect life together. However, she mentions she has been eating more and more, especially at the middle of the night and when she is alone; at the presence of other family members, she eats a little, the same as before, which makes the children wonder why she is getting fat. Her husband does not seem to be concerned about this and she finds this a justification to go on eating. He even starts bringing her expensive and delicious chocolate from each trip which she starts eating whenever he leaves again for the next business trip. Then something happens. One day the telephone rings; the young woman on the phone, Rigenda, tells her that she is like a second wife for her husband and has recently had a baby; she wants the narrator to let him get a divorce so that he can take care of his new wife and baby full time. The narrator is obviously shocked, does not believe this at the beginning. Rigenda proves the fact, but the narrator does not seem disturbed, says that she trusts her husband, does not agree with a divorce, knows that the foundations of her family are so strong, and finally asks the woman not to call again. The only reaction of hers is to look for more chocolates in the empty box. After she hangs up, she is as peaceful as she used to be, thinks for a short while and reassures herself that everything
is fine between her and her husband and plans to have another midnight meal and a hot chocolate.

Important Elements of the Story Reflecting Female Identity

It is not only what is communicated, but also, and more importantly perhaps, the manner the story is narrated and the ideas transferred, that represent the subject-in-process. To trace these, let us consider some of the most important elements of the two stories.

The Protagonist

Both stories have a first-person narrator, the first is a young and the second a middle-aged woman. In the Iranian story, Matin is detached from others and wishes to be so, as if it would be enough for her to have a fiancé and no other relations; she even denies she knows the fortune teller, a former classmate, and refuses to make friends with her again. The protagonist of the second story is in a very similar situation. She does not try to communicate with anyone other than her family members, who are all far from her most of the times and are busy dealing with their own business.

The Antagonist

There is a character in each story that confronts the protagonist; the function of this character (who is a woman, herself) seems to be to warn the protagonist, uselessly, not to be drowned in the fantasy world she has made for herself. The fortune teller is supposed to be the one who gives idealistic pictures of future or false hopes. However, in Spideh Shamlou’s story, she is definitely the more realistic person of the two. She keeps telling Matin the food is burnt, the fiancé might leave her and her predictions foreshadow a not-so-hopeful future. In “Weighing Up”, too, the second woman, ironically, looks for a solution, tries to make the wife see the truth and accept that her husband has cheated on her—the obvious facts that she is not even ready to think about. She is not even trying to show any anger or resentment and goes back to obsessive eating.

The Plot

The structure of the plot in these stories reflects the characters’ mentality. There is one critical point in both stories; however, in neither case does it have any effect on the protagonist. The way the protagonist reacts to the news is so indifferent that one imagines nothing has really happened. Both protagonists are told disturbing facts about the man of their life but they deny this and pretend nothing has happened. As a result, there is no real visible crisis in the story that changes the course of events; there is no turning point in the fate of the characters, their understanding or even a doubt created in their minds. Everything goes on the same way it had been
before. Perhaps it is only the reader who is shocked and experiences the epiphany-like moment.

**Female Protagonist as the “Subject”**

In both stories, interestingly, the names are of particular importance. This reflects the importance of the concept of identity and regarding the characters as ‘subjects’. In “The Red Gloves”, the fortune teller tries to make Matin recall their childhood; she mentions her name and the name of their old school. Matin denies she remembers the names. The future husband’s name as predicted by the fortune teller is not the same as the fiancé’s; this perhaps is at least a warning, if not a fact, that the present man is not the one Matin wishes him to be, to say the least. In “Weighing Up”, too, there is emphasis on the names. The second woman mentions the husband’s name to introduce herself, miscalls the first woman’s name, (unimportant to her apparently) stating quite indifferently that she just has a vague idea what the name is.

Both protagonists have something else in common that shows how uncomfortable they can be with who they really are. The former keeps smoking that is a refuge from her fears, anxieties and denials. The latter has taken up a habit of compulsive eating, especially eating the chocolates that her husband brings her to make up for his long trips. She keeps on eating things secretly at night and gaining weight, carefully hiding her habit from every member of her family. These compulsive, self-destructive behaviors cannot actually save the women from her insecure life; it is just a temporary, damaging and annoying habit that distracts her attention from the major problems in her life.

**Conclusion: “Beyond all judgment, you are”**

This study undertook to consider just a few suggestions introduced by the methodology of critical analysis practiced by Poststructuralist Feminism. The aim, as was mentioned earlier, was to follow the de/construction of female identity in the stories and showing how it works.

The comparative nature of this study, however, could suggest a second layer to the main conclusion; an understanding which raises two concluding suggestions of its own: first to see how different examples can lend themselves to the kind of reading introduced in this article; and second, to find out whether a story written in Iran, belonging to a language and culture totally different from what the European mentality knows, might be analyzed -- and compared to -- the one that has strong affinities with the theoretical background used here. Now, looking at the amazing similarity that can be found between the fictional worlds of the two stories, it seems appropriate to conclude that the critique of the phallocentric discourses is
Sharif

observable in both cases. Apparently, both writers have -- most probably, quite unconsciously -- answered to the call for new representations of women’s consciousness. This, of course, should not lead us to a simplistic view of superficial similarities of the stories. As Irigaray (2004) suggested, “dialogue within difference engenders a reality and a truth of both contents and forms of discourse which can never be formalized once and for all” (p. 75).

There is, definitely, a lot to be discovered in other case studies that the author hopes to be performed in future to point to new horizons of the “dialogue” between the critical theory and fictional works in one level and the world of works belonging to different cultures in another.

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References


