20th Century Women's Poetry: the resistance to marginalization


A literature that does not include the depth and range of female consciousness is bound to be an amputated one, and reflect back a dangerously distorted image of the society it is supposed to illuminate” (Couzyn:1985:16).

Certainly, in the last years of the 20th century many women writers have appeared in the arena of British literature, giving voice to one of the groups in society long silenced or at least disregarded or ignored. They still have to fight male prejudice against both the content of their poetry and their role in society as a poet –not the traditionally feminine roles of mother, wife...In that way, the female or feminine has been equated with other marginalised groups in society –blacks, gays, etc- with regard to their negative or oppressed relationship with the main established order, the symbolic order, imposed by a white male-dominated society. But it is a mistake to bring together all these different sections of society as their ideology and position have quite distinct origins. Similarly, we cannot define a “feminine absolute” or feminine experience as a whole as being one of a marginal or repressed position in relation to the male culture, for, in that way, we are granting a fixed negative conception of the women’s status.

We shall also examine how some deconstruction French feminists have equated feminine subversive writing with linguistic marginality (avant-garde, experimental writing) in a phallocentric or phallogocentric language, thus wrongly merging together cultural marginalisation with linguistic marginality (for them, it is only the experimental, the syntactically disruptive which constitutes the marginal feminine discourse).

The purpose of this paper is to deal with the way in which women’s poetry –“part of an investigation of women’s use of high language, that is, the language, public, political and literary of patriarchal societies” (Kaplan:1986:311)- is subverting or trying to do away with the muted or marginalised position they have long held in society. We have left aside the poems apparently ungendered, dealing with general topics, for this would lead us to a long and fruitless search for indications of gender in poems only because of the fact that they have been written by women.

THE WOMAN-POET

“As well as being a method of self-examination and a technique of contemplation, writing of poems is a very effective method of getting away from the agitations and demands of the self” (R. Fainlight in Couzyn:1985:130).
The situation of woman poets is, or at least was, a very particular one. In the patriarchal society where they live, their social role is that of silence. There is a strong distinction between their private and their public speech (high language of poetry, among one of its manifestations).

Traditionally, their public role was one of silence, and whenever they had the chance to speak up it was a sort of extension of their private, trivial domestic discourse. Earlier poets are conscious of the silenced place they are restricted to in this society and some of them fall into this frame, now with a new and fresh irony or sarcasm; Levertov’s The Mutes: “Those groans men use/to tell her she is a female/and their flesh knows it/...life after life after life goes by/without poetry.../without love”.

The condition of woman-poet places them in a special relationship with language which becomes at the same time personal yet foreign to them as females, for it is a male language. Many poems are concerned with this split between their sexual and social identity (as women and poets respectively) and we find many examples of self-definitions; R. Fainlight’s Introspection of a Sybil: “you don’t exist/yet have the power of a god, (...) /And the price for such knowledge? To have/ absolutely no command over your life (...)

Inherent in the knowledge of the female situation is the impossibility of communicating it. By the same author, Definition: “who told me my place? I am released by language/ I escape through speech (...) /which sets me free/ From whomever’s definition: Jew, poet, woman”.

**LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF SUBVERSION. THE OTHER.**

“Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him...For him, she is sex...He is Subject, he is Absolute- she is the Other” (Beauvoir in Walder:1990:307).

Levertov’s The Mutes (quoted above) and Couzyn’s The message are clear examples of the worries of these contemporary authors to establish a gap, a difference between a feminine and a masculine discourse which they try to subvert: “The message of the men is linear(...) /But the message of the women is love(...) /greyness of wanting, heaviness of getting”. Or Feinstein’s Calliope in the Labour Ward: “They sail to a/darkness without self/where no will reaches/in that abandoned/than human”.

Many poets are conscious of their “otherness” and their poems are filled with images and definitions of the parallel world they inhabit. Lockheed’s Mirror song makes use of this kind of imagery: “smash me looking-glass glass(...) /a woman giving birth to herself”. In the same line, Fainlight’s poems, and especially It must are a challenge, a rebellion against this position of otherness to which they are confined: “Friends, sisters, are you used to your face in the mirror? (...) /the face reflected back is always a shock (...) /blurt out the taboo words” (the other always associated with the “taboo” or repressed in society).

French theoreticians have argued by making use of psychoanalytical theories, that feminist writing (in our case, any women’s writing or concerned with it) subverts the social order and its signifying and symbolic practices. The connection between language and patriarchal society -power- is linked with the phase of the acquisition of language -by the child- in a society of male defined symbolic practices (by this we refer to the way in which the human beings know things by naming them. The knowledge and structure of the world are then determined by the language, male-defined). Thus, the masculine
is the universal, relegating the feminine to the complementary, negative pole which has to seek definition in this submission to the male power. Therefore they go on arguing, “social and symbolic structures are defined as repressive forms of objectification, the embodiment of the realm of male reason and order” (Felski:1989:42) and to subvert them, one must attack them at their basis: language (which is the ultimate instrument upon which everything is built).

These critics equate then, feminist or feminine discourse with subversive and disruptive syntactical structures. R. Fainlight’s poems, already quoted, are a clear example of this wish to subvert male patterns through language, or M. Jastrzebska’s Bi-lingual: “But even the there’s a gap/Even between words that are supposed to mean the same”. Even Duffy’s Foreign can be interpreted in this consciousness of marginal speech. And Beer’s Overseas Student criticises this kind of male-patterned discourse: “This year they have set us/Lady into fox/I know what a lady is, (…)/But not the other word (…)/But will she then/Be in the stomach or the heart/of a heroic man?”.

WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE

The relationships of gender and culture- and, consequently, literature- is much more complex than assuming a direct relationship between women’s writing and a particular linguistic form (subversion of the language, as avant-garde artists did, to oppose the dominant signifying practice, equating thus feminity with negativity). It is not a simple equation of gendered writing with a universal female experience either. This would be to force the variety of historically-conditioned experiences of women into one single pattern which leaves out ideological connotations of personal subjectivity –the specific woman- and textual representation (commented on above in the previous point). We shall come back to this idea of textual determination by gender further on.

What is important then, and what is reflected in many of these poems, -the ones selected in this paper- is the way in which clear-cut female experiences (birth, motherhood, menstruation…) or more universal ones are sifted through a feminine perspective which is not universal at all but condition by the historical and social situation (of which gender is a part) these writers live in. Thus, we are meeting with the authentic women’s writing, the one that tries to resist that marginalization by invoking the viewpoint and topics, -in a way woman’s culture-, long ignored or repressed by a male-prejudiced society, editors and readers: “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (Cixous in Walder:1990:320).

By exalting the feminine body and physicality these poets are vindicating and reconciling the other in themselves and trying to force it into history, the cultural order. Thus, images of women, mothers, wombs are commonplace. Shuttle’s poems stress the purely female physical functions. Fosse and Moos’s Spendthrifts are poems about menstruation (“I hear the new question and its invitation,/ Bleeding this fathomless blood,…”); First Foetal Movements of my Daughter, Lockhead’s An Abortion and Couzyn’s Transformation deal with the process of motherhood-abortion in really direct terms (“beast’s agony”, “Guernica of distress”, “another ovule/Tumbles into the depth”…). The imagery of these poets is more aggressive, and not only in this kind of poem.
They use crude terms in their experiences of the world. In The Mother Poem Jackie Kay also deals with a feminine problem (adoption of a child) in an attempt to do away with any kind of difference - race, sex…-, but it is precisely the language she uses that leads us to regard the poem as a feminine stance: “all this umbilical knot business is/nonsense- the men can afford deeper sleeps/that’s all. (...)my baby, my baby”.

These topics are in a way, new to poetry, although some others, typically female, had been dealt with long before: marriage, children, love, everyday life. This implied a breakthrough with social conventions, and with the social role reserved for women. They were conscious of their transgression in bringing up these topics.

Some poets take a historical or legendary figure to ironies about the submissive woman: Wander’s poems on biblical figures: “I am still a stranger”, “you should never get too/involved/with a mother-in-law” (about Ruth) are excellent examples; Robert’s Rite de passage on Joan of Arc: “poor freak (born too soon) she carried on/crying out messages they could not hear” or Ann Stevenson’s Love Letter and Correspondences: “I’ve been thinking and thinking,/wondering whether I’ll ever succeed in being/the tender, devoted little wife you wanted me to be,/Because...oh, Mama,/why didn’t you tell me or warn me before/was married/that a wife is expected to do it every night!”.

But most of them treat their everyday experience with a very defiant attitude – especially their relations with men. By apparently submitting (in their poems and language) to the discourse and relations imposed by men, they are resisting or subverting them. There are numerous examples, like Adcock’s Madmen: “Odd how the seemingly maddest of men (...)return to their gentle senses in bed (...)they perform with routine confidence (...)they leave their women grateful, relieved and bored”; Hill’s The Ram: “Well, he says, d’you like it?/All I can think of is granny/how she used to shake her head, (...)and say ah, Bless your little cotton socks!”; Rumen’s A marriage: “I must become his child:/To look at him as a woman/would turn me cold with shame”; Moos’s The Black Shawl: “He whose arms were my house/sleeps, unhoused,(...) As though dead/Even a dog must eat!”; Gilligan’s poems: “When I come home, tired/from a hard day’s work,/I do not wish/to be greeted/by a sinkful/of dirty/WASHING UP”, “Life’s not all moonlight sonatas’ said Mother,/adjusting the hammers inside her head” or to put an end to this never-ending account, the strong words of Pitt-Kethley’s Sky Ray Lolly: “The world still sees me as a nasty kid/usurping maleness/(...) All things most natural in men, in me/are vice-having no urge to cook or clean,/lacking maternal instincts” and Paying for sex: “And there are men who dub you ‘beautiful’/who also need ‘I love you’s’ said before./Romantic shits”.

Many of these tend to contain an anticipatory response to male prejudice (as has been seen). Extremely clear in Mordecai’s Tell me: “So tell me, brother/what have you to give?”.

Finally there is that kind of poem which appeals directly to a recognition of female identity, usually dealing with sisterhood: Robert’s Magnificat: “it was a holy communion/between women, a visitation”, Joseph’s Persefone: “But following suggests that you could move?come down,/You who turn from things,/into my black domain where the silence would suit you” referring to “Those who turn their face to the wall/And cover their heads...(the universal everyday woman) These are mine” or the pathetic vision of Adcock’s The Soho Hospital for Women where they all are linked by common disgrace.
They may also be tinged with some other social aspects, like black women’s poetry, in which there is a mixture of the social role of black women in a repressed regime with the feminine identity, like Valerie Bloom’s poems or Nichol’s The Return: “Is that you Black Priestess/is that your Abeng voice/echoing its warcry through the valleys?” or Waterpot: “She tried hard to walk/like a woman/she tried very hard/pulling herself erect/(…)and the overseer sneering/(…)sneered at the pathetic-/the pathetic display/of dignity”.

FINAL REMARKS

“The lady moans/No one can hear her./The bushwoman grins” (Paterson’s In a South African Museum).

Women’s experience is very varied, and their interpretation of it is far from being identical or universal; it constitutes, however the basis for the ideology or political activity which builds up their “new” voice in society. As we have seen, it is their experience, and their interpretation of it from a female viewpoint that constitutes the bulk of feminine/feminist writing; writing which, in a way, tries to resist or subvert the marginalising established male-centred cultural order. Gender is then a solid ground to build up a different, opposing and subversive literature which is now being noticed.

But gender does not constitute in itself a safe vehicle to determine textual contents. “A range of textual positions is available to both sexes, and it is often impossible to construct a straightforward determining relationship between the gender of the writing subject and the distinctive formal and thematic features of a literary work” (Felski:1989:49). But of course writing is not “bisexual or neuter” (in Cixous’s terms), as we have tried to show above. However we have avoided including apparently ungendered poems in which there is an ambivalence of readings if we take into account the name of the author (male or female): Patricia Beer’s Lemmings could be interpreted as a metaphor of women’s position in society: “One by one they leave the air/And drown as individuals/(…)Is nothing worse than restlessness/The need to change and nothing else./Thinking there is land/Beyond them, as indeed there is”. Similarly, Vicky Feaver’s Teddy Bears: “Brought out of the cupboard (…)/like gods completely forgotten/when times were good/ (…)Companions who don’t complain/(…)They are philosophic/about the way life treats them: (…)/They are souls of discretion”. In Fainlight’s words (Couzyn:1985:130): “I am convinced that the ‘negative capability’ of the poet extends beyond/below/above gender. I am a poet who is a woman, not a woman poet”.

We can conclude then, that the way women’s poetry uses to draw attention to itself as representative of a marginalised group of society is to subvert the male centred and prejudiced culture (literature too) either through really disruptive linguistic techniques (as deconstructivists suggest, though it is not really relevant in the poetry examined) or introduction of themes and perspectives different from or opposed to the traditional ones, revealing many times samples of their social and cultural marginalization. In no case can they really turn the attacked culture upside down, for they are part of it, within it (they cannot subvert the signifying practice of it, for they make use of it to express –through language and convention- this subversion). It is precisely their refusal to submit themselves to the establishment that makes their poems more interesting and, consequently, gains more attention- they resist marginalization.
**Bibliografía**


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**Los hipopótamos**

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El proyecto que presentamos a continuación lo llevamos a cabo con los alumnos de educación Infantil, de cuatro años en el tercer trimestre, donde estudiamos los hipopótamos.

Los animales son uno de los elementos del entorno natural más significativos para ellos, ya que nos sirven como elemento de juego, experiencia y observación. Por esta razón vamos a trabajar como son los hipopótamos, para profundizar en el conocimiento de la vida de estos animales y, a partir de ella, estableceremos un paralelismo con los seres humanos.

A través de nuestros amigos los hipopótamos, vamos a promover hábitos de alimentación saludable entre nuestros alumnos, porque en estas edades la alimentación es un aspecto muy importante para el desarrollo armónico de los niños y niñas, y para su bienestar físico. La alimentación desarrolla una función decisiva en el bienestar general del cuerpo. Así, la escuela es un pilar básico donde llevaremos a cabo una buena educación para la salud, y contribuiremos de esta manera en una educación integral de nuestros alumnos.

La presencia de alumnado nuevo es una realidad en nuestras aulas, por el que es necesario realizar actividades que fomenten la integración de estos niños y niñas en la escuela, impulsando una actitud de respeto y amistad entre todos los alumnos.

El hipopótamo, como cualquier otro animal, es un ser vivo, y por esta razón se debe respetar. Intentamos a lo largo de todas las actividades que nuestros alumnos aprendan a tratar a los animales...