



Hilda Doolittle as a Myth-Maker: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Study of Hilda Doolittle’s “Sea Violet” and “Sea Gods”

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ABSTRACT

Patriarchal societies degrade females because of what they think of as a biological deficiency that is represented through the lack of the male sexual organ. This leads such societies to oppress females mentally as well as physically. This encourages a number of writers to indulge themselves in studying the psychological abnormality that the patriarchal societies lead the females to suffer from. Thus, by adopting the psychoanalytical feminist view, Hilda Doolittle aims to heal the female race from the patriarchal wounds that leads them to lose their identity as independent human beings. Accordingly, this paper aims at investigating how Doolittle does this by depending on the Greek gods and goddesses as examples that could help her in supporting her argument that femininity has been defined falsely according to an unjust patriarchal canon.

Key words: *patriarchal canon, phallogentrism, subjugation, feminine identity*

The logo for the International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (IJRSSH) is a large, stylized graphic. It features a central figure that resembles a person or a flame, composed of several overlapping, curved shapes in shades of blue, green, and orange. This central figure is set against a background of a large, light-colored circle. Below the graphic, the acronym 'IJRSSH' is written in a bold, orange, sans-serif font.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the fact that females are looked at in androcentric societies as inferior to males because of what they refer to as biological deficiency that leads a well-known figure like Aristotle to refer to them as “mutilated male[s]” (Mayhew 55), feminists indulge themselves in studying the psychological state of females as a kind of response to such kind of degradation. This is because feminists realize the “personal experience of sexism” that leads to their “acute awareness of widespread sexist assumptions about women” (Chrisler and McCreary 19). It is fair to say, though, that a feminist consciousness existed even before this indulgence of feminists in the psychological field. This is shown through John Stuart Mill and his article “The Subjection of Women” (1869), through which he tackles the patriarchal societies and its suppression of females:

All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. And by

their affections are meant the only ones they are allowed to have—those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and indefeasible tie between them and a man (Mill 43).

Mill explains his refusal to such kind of attitude in his essay:

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (29).

Due to his criticism of the policy of the patriarchal society against females, Mill is harshly criticized for tackling a topic that concerns “the strangest” and “the most ignoble and mischievous of all the popular feelings of the age” (Packe 495).

Patriarchal societies look at females as inferior mostly because of what Sigmund Freud refers to as “penis envy” (Tong 132). He justifies this by mentioning that the biological lack that the female suffers from leads her to wish to have a penis, since it is regarded as a source of power. However, psychoanalytic feminists claim that both male and female infants “are born helpless” (Tong 136). This means that it is the society, into which those infants are born, is to be blamed for oppressing the females because it “embrace[s] phallogentrism, the belief that identifies the phallus as the source of power in culture,” which, in return, would affect the psychological development of the female infant (Bressler 144). This leads the female to grow with what Karen Horney, a German psychoanalyst, refers to as “basic anxiety,” which she defines as “a feeling of being small, insignificant, helpless, deserted, endangered in a world that is out to abuse, cheat, attack, humiliate, betray, envy” (Horney 1937, 92). This “basic anxiety” leads eventually to “self-contempt” (262).

Horney claims that in order for females to get rid of this “self-contempt,” they have to adopt another self that will compensate the hated self for them. Thus, since the real self is not able to make itself acceptable, then “it is only through the domain of the false self that the [female] is

able to experience the communion of subjective sharing and consensual validation of personal knowledge” (Stern 228). This false self, which Horney refers to as “idealized self,” is the one upon which the female is to build her confidence and the feeling of having an identity (Horney 1950, 23). This “idealized self” leads females to have masculine and feminine traits and Horney claims that such females know that their inferiority is not due to their biological deficiency but because of the society that prefer the penis owners over them. Such a thing will make females psychologically healthy because they obtain the humanly rights that patriarchy refers to as masculine (Tong 137). This is supported by Luce Irigaray, a French psychoanalyst, who encourages females to “undo the effects of phallogentric discourse simply by overdoing them” (Moi 140).

So, this paper aims at investigating the psychoanalytic feminist view in Hilda Doolittle’s “Sea Violet” and “Sea Gods.” Doolittle does this by depending on the classical myths as a way to support her argument that females are subjugated even if they are goddesses. This proves that it is the society that should be blamed for the oppression of the females because even the goddesses, who are supposed to be flawless or otherwise they are not ones, are thought of less by the patriarchal societies.

Thus, Doolittle's usage of the classical myths is to heal the female race by assuring them that it is not wrong to be born biologically different from the males.

A PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINIST STUDY OF HILDA DOOLITTLE'S "SEA VIOLET" AND SEA GODS"

Hilda Doolittle's "Sea Violet" is taken from her volume that comes under the title *Sea Garden* (1916). It tackles Doolittle's aim to change the traditional definition of femininity that attaches it to passivity. This is shown through the comparison between the two kinds of violets, which are used metaphorically to refer to two different kinds of females. Doolittle uses the violets metaphorically because she believes that "nature has traditionally been understood to be feminine" (Robinson 56). Thus, the sea violet, which is also referred to as the white violet, is used to represent the untraditional meaning of femininity, which Doolittle highly supports, while the blue violet represent the traditional meaning of femininity.

The poem begins with a description of the sea violet, which is also referred to as "the white violet" (1), and how it is "scented on its stalk" (2). This shows that the violet is not standing in a healthy way, but it bends because it is "fragile as agate" (4). Doolittle likens the white violet to

"agate" because even though the latter is known as a fragile kind of rock, yet it is beautiful. This kind of beauty is shown by Doolittle when she describes that although the white violet is "fragile," yet it "lies fronting all the wind/ among the torn shells/ on the sand-bank" (5-7). The ability of the sea violet to stand against the obstacles that are put in front of it attracts Doolittle's attention that females who stand against the patriarchal restrictions are more beautiful than those who surrender to the patriarchal violence, which Doolittle conveys through the reference to "torn shells." Despite this violence, the sea violet is the one to be put in a lower like "the sand-bank" and not the doer of such violence. This explains how the patriarchal societies disdain females. This is similar to what Elaine Showalter, an influential feminist, calls misogyny. She defines it as the term that describes the contempt that the patriarchal societies bore for females (Bressler 152). Thus, it seems as if the patriarchal society, to which the sea violet belongs, rewards the males for torturing the females by putting the tortured in a lower position.

The lower positions of the sea violet and the obstacles that it faces might make it fair to associate it with the Greek goddess Persephone, who is abducted to the underworld by Hades, the god of the underworld (Hamilton 29). Besides being

both dragged to a lower position by males, the sea violet is similar to Persephone in that both bring hope of a probable change. While Persephone, who is known as a goddess of spring, brings hope to the dark underworld to the extent that the inhabitants of the underworld refer to her as “good goddess” (Hamilton 53), sea violet brings hope to Doolittle to the extent that she refers to it as “star” (17). This indicates that Doolittle “long[s] to break out of [her] psychic paralysis and escape to the heady freedom of the alternate stormy landscape” (Laity 113).

Doolittle, then, introduces the other kind of violets, the “blue violets,” which are referred to as “the greater blue violets” (8). This shows the kind of appreciation that the patriarchal societies show to those females who surrender against the patriarchal restrictions. This kind of appreciation is shown through the position of the violets, which “flutter on the hill” (9). Throughout the “blue violets,” Doolittle aims to convey the idea that patriarchal societies construct the identity of females according to their own restrictions. This leads the female to the self-denial because she is not what she really is, but what the society makes of her. This leads to what Horney refers to as “basic anxiety,” which indicates “a feeling of being small, insignificant, helpless, deserted, endangered in a world that is out

to abuse, cheat, attack, humiliate, betray, envy” (Horney 1937, 92). According to Horney, females tend to get rid of this kind of anxiety through complete submissiveness thinking that “if I give in, always do what people expect, never ask for anything, never resist—then nobody will hurt me” (Horney 1967, 258). However, Stuart Mill claims that the “feminine blandishment” is workable only when the female is “young and attractive” (Mill 65). This means that without beauty all females are to be tortured by the misogynistic societies. As a result, Doolittle appreciate the white violet, which appears able to defend itself against the difficulties, to the extent of referring to the idea that the blue violet is not worthy of even the roots of the white violet; “Who would change for these/ one root of the white sort?” (11-12).

Throughout the comparison between the sea violet and the blue violets, Doolittle wants to convey the idea that beauty alone is not able to protect any female from the destruction of her identity by the patriarchal societies. This is because such societies do not acknowledge the beauty when it is “dimmed by familiarity” (Mill 68). This means that the blue violet will be subjected to oppression once it starts to lose its beauty. This could be linked to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who is referred to in one of the Homeric

Hymns as “violet-crowned” (Hamilton 32). Aphrodite is known to be one of the reasons that agitate that Trojan War because she promises Helen to Paris, who is supposed to choose between her and the other two goddesses to give the golden apple that is meant for the fairest, even though Helen was married (179). This supports the above claim that beauty alone is destructive. The destruction of Troy could be used metaphorically to refer to the destruction of the self if one depends only on the beautiful appearance.

Doolittle supports her rejection of such a complete dependence on beauty alone in the last stanza of the poem, which is more of an advice that Doolittle passes on to all the females about the need to associate themselves with the white violet instead of the blue violets:

Violet

Your grasp is frail

On the edge of the sand-hill,

But you catch the light—

Frost, a star edges with its fire (13-17).

The usage of the word “violet” alone is Doolittle’s way to universalize her speech. Throughout this stanza, Doolittle, who might be the speaker of the poem, assures females that it does not matter whether they are fragile or unable to figure out the

things around them, and no matter where they are positioned, all females are important once they believe in themselves. Doolittle’s usage of the word “light” is to give a kind of hope to all the females that change is possible.

Throughout the last line of the poem, Doolittle combines between “frost” and “fire” as an indication that females could be so much more than what is expected from them. This means that females could be strong like the white violet and beautiful like the blue violet. Accordingly, Doolittle aims to change the “compulsory order of gender” (Butler 9) that refers to the idea that gender “mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (10). Instead, she indicates that gender has nothing but a “linguistic reality” in a society that depends on the phallogocentric discourse (Allison 18). Thus, by combining the “fire” and the “frost,” Doolittle aims to encourage the females to be strong as the white violet to “lies fronting all the wind” (5). Doolittle’s appreciation of strength, which is regarded as a masculine trait, follows Luce Irigaray’s idea to “undo the effects of phallogocentric discourse simply by overdoing them” (Moi 140).

In addition to what has been accounted for above, Doolittle’s “Sea Gods” of *Sea Garden* demonstrates the maturation of Doolittle as a poet from a

female to a woman; according to Simone de Beauvoir “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 267). Throughout this poem, Doolittle tackles the psychological effects of the patriarchal societies upon females and her way to heal them by associating her characters with the classical myths and gods.

The poem begins with Doolittle’s confession that she no longer accepts the patriarchal restrictions and that is why she uses “they” in the first line “they say there is no hope” (1). This means that it is the patriarchal societies that believe in the validation of such restrictions not me; Doolittle. It could be said, then, that the division of the poem into three sections might be used as an indication that Doolittle, who might represent the entire female race, goes through certain phases through which she develop herself in order to gain her new feminine identity. Doolittle claims that by “there is no hope” (1), androcentric societies aim to block out every opportunity for the females to have an identity. By doing so, the patriarchal societies aim to form the feminine persona, which is “the image that we show to others” (Dobie 63), according to their canon that is based upon the “biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women” (Tyson 85). As a result, they try to convince them that by

trying to have a feminine identity that is different from the one that is formed by the patriarchal canon, they are going to be “broken,” “hung,” and “pallid.”

The misogynistic societies assure females that developing themselves would make them oppose what Helene Cixous refers to as “polar opposites” (Tyson 100) that depend on the “biological essentialism” that states that females are inferior and second to males (85). However, Doolittle’s usage of the word “cracked” could refer to the idea that patriarchal canon is not as solid as it was, especially with the females’ attempts to babble out of such societies. Thus, “you must rise to refute” (10). The “you” could refer either to females and, thus, Doolittle is encouraging them to stand out for themselves against a canon that proves itself to be “cracked,” or to Poesidon, the Greek god who is known for his ability to make “the thunder of the waves sank into stillness” (Hamilton 29). Accordingly, Doolittle might aim to associate between females and such god known for his power to change to make them believe in their ability to change their current state of oppression and degradation.

According to psychology, the oppression that females suffer from in patriarchal societies could be traced back to their childhood. This is because

according to Sigmund Freud “children go through distinct psychosexual developmental stages and their gender identity as adults is the result of how well or badly they have weathered this process” (Tong 129). This could be supported by Jessica Benjamin’s concept of the “third,” which refers to “a mutually differentiating system, an exchange of recognition,” through which “the mother will be recognized as part of a mutual dynamic of reciprocal responsiveness and understanding” (Benjamin 2-3). This means that the relation between the infant and the mother during its first months is so strong that he starts to attack her once he feels that such relation would be weakened. It is worth mentioning that the interference of the father is responsible for weakening the relation between the mother and the infant, whose attacks against his mother continue because she appears unable to respond to them because she does not have an independent identity (5). This leads eventually to the separation between the mother and the child, who stores his mother’s weakness in his subconscious through what is referred to as internalization. Roy Shcafer defines it as a process “by which the subject transforms real or imagined regulatory interactions with his environment and real or imagined characteristics of his environment, into inner regulations and characteristics”

(Aron and Harris 234). This leads the male child to form an idea that all females are weak and should be subjugated.

Doolittle supports this by mentioning that androcentric societies refer to those females who try to free themselves from the patriarchal canon as “twisted” in “you are twisted by the sea.” According to the dictionary, the word “twisted” refers to those who are “mentally or emotionally unsound or disturbed” (Merriam-Webster). This means that they accuse females of being mentally unstable for trying to free themselves and be independent beings. However, it could be said that the patriarchal societies fear the independence of females because this would affect the masculine I, which males gain through what Julia Kristeva refers to as abject. Kristeva describes it as “safeguards. The primers of [male’s] culture” (Kristeva 2). Thus, the interference of any female in the masculine world would affect their identity that is based upon the child-mother separation.

Throughout the second section of the poem, one could say that Doolittle refers, metaphorically, to the ability of the feminine sexual organ to “bring” different kinds of children. This could support the existence of females in androcentric societies by creating their feminine sexuality that is represented through their

labia that consists of “two lips” that defeat the singularity of the masculine sexual organ. Thus, the feminine “sexuality is always at least double, goes even further; it is plural” (Irigaray 28).

Based on what has been accounted through the first and second sections of the poem, the third section is remarked for its change in Doolittle’s identity, which is now associated with the concept of “new women,” which “challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power” (Smith-Rosenberg 245). This is shown clearly through her ability to use “men” explicitly instead of the “they” of the first section:

For you will come,

You will yet haunt men in ships (38-39).

Referring to “men” directly as the responsible for the oppression that females suffer from in patriarchal societies show that Doolittle follows Luce Irigaray’s view about the necessity to start having a “feminine feminine” view instead of the “masculine feminine” view that defines femininity according to the misogynistic canon that reduces their potentials (Tong 155). Thus, the “you” in the above two lines could refer to the “new woman” who is able, like Poseidon the “earth-shaker” (Hamilton 29), to change the canon to be

suitable for her as an independent human being.

One could say that if the title of the poem is meant as it is actually pronounced, then it might be sated as “See Gods.” Thus, it could be said that besides Poseidon, Doolittle might refer to the other Greek god Apollo. This is because according to the Greek myth, Apollo is known to be “the healer” (Hamilton 30). Accordingly, it is fair to say that Doolittle identifies herself with Apollo because she tries to heal the female race from the psychological effects that the patriarchal societies lead the entire female race to suffer from. Thus, it is as if Doolittle asks all the females to follow her steps in using the “feminine feminine” view and define their identity according to it. This is because it is the only way through which they can heal their “taut hearts” (59). She assures them that by following her steps they can eventually have a voice that would lead them to “answer with a shout” (56) that “will break the lie of men’s thoughts” (60) and this would “cherish and shelter us” (61). Thus, Doolittle wants to convey the idea that having a voice would protect females against misogyny.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the two poems that are taken from *Sea Garden*, Hilda Doolittle tries to heal the female race from the

psychological wounds that the patriarchal societies lead them to suffer from because of what they refer to as biological deficiency. Doolittle starts this healing journey by redefining femininity according to the “feminine feminine” view that stands in contrast with the “masculine feminine” view that reduces the females’ potentials. Doolittle does that by associating the female speakers of her poems, who might be Doolittle herself, with the Greek gods and goddesses. Through Aphrodite, Doolittle assures females that depending on beauty alone is destructive and thus, females should be like the white violet that appears able to face the difficulties to the extent of attracting Doolittle’s attention, who associates it with “star” as a way to show that it guides her to seek change. Accordingly, changing the definition of femininity should begin with changing the stereotypical picture that the patriarchal societies attach to femininity that states that they should be just beautiful beings.

Changing this stereotypical picture is done through regressing back to childhood, from which all the behaviors of adulthood emanate. By doing so, it turns out that the interference of the father in between the mother and the child leads to their separation, which affect the psychological development of the child because he appears unable to handle this kind of separation and that leads him to attack her. However, the mother’s weakness because of the fact that she does not have an independent self that enable her to stand against such attacks leads her child to form an idea that all females are weak and should be oppressed. By understanding this, Doolittle exhorts females to reject the patriarchal canon and start believing in their right to live independently because they are not biologically deficient. Instead, they are better than males in being the owner of the labia that defeats the singularity of the male sexual organ and gives birth to both males and females.

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