

**Gynocriticism, “the Psychodynamics of Female Creativity”
and the Female Bildungsroman: A Showalterian Reading of
Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Sylvia
Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Salwa Bakr’s *The Golden Chariot*.**

A Thesis Submitted by
Jaidaa Gawad Hamada
For the Degree of Ph.D. in Literary Criticism

Supervisor
Prof. Azza M. H. El Kholy

Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
University of Alexandria

2009

Acknowledgements

Now that I am standing here for the disputation of my Ph.D. dissertation, I cannot help not recalling the day when I stood in the very same place, three years ago, for the defense of my M.A. dissertation. Three years have elapsed; three years that have been vibrant with happiness, triumph and success, as much as they have been fraught with challenges, stumbling blocks, grief and disappointment; three years that have been of paramount importance to my “bildungsroman”; three years that have signalled so many changes in my life; most importantly, three years that have taught me that although the winds of change will incessantly blow over our lives, there are things that remain immutable--things that are impervious to any change. As a matter of fact, there are things that grow stronger as time drifts by. My love and gratitude for my family, professors friends and colleagues are chief among these things.

Mulling over my past life, I realize how lucky and privileged I am to be taught by a cadre of distinguished professors for whom my gratitude and admiration become stronger each and every single day: Professor Azza Karara; Professor Zeinab Raafat; Professor Laila Morsi; Dr. Mahmoud Hassan (R.I.P); Professor Amira Nowaira, the model of punctuality and organization; Professor Essam Fattouh, the godfather of our department who has been lately a source of great encouragement and consolation, investing me with faith and confidence; Dr. Suzan Meshaal, kindness incarnate; Professor Nazek Fahmy, who always astounds me with her knowledge and insight. Professor Sahar Hammouda, who enchants me with a new wonderful facet of her personality the more I get to know her. If I was not fortunate enough to be taught by her as an undergraduate and a postgraduate student, I have been fortunate to know her and learn from her as my

professor, my former head of department and today my examiner. I am greatly obliged to her for her examination of my research. I am also greatly obliged to Professor Sherine Abu El Naga for her examination of my research and for coming all the way from Cairo. Last, but certainly not least, Professor Azza El Kholy; my teacher, professor, academic role-model, and supervisor, to whom I will be forever indebted and thankful. My love, admiration, respect and gratitude for her grow stronger each and every single day. She has exerted and continues to exert an immeasurable impact on me. Had it not been for her illuminating guidance, motherly support and conscientious supervision, I would not have been standing here today. Three years ago when I was standing here for the disputation of my M.A dissertation, I regarded it as an honour to be working under her supervision and to have her call me “the daughter [she has] never had”; today, I see it not only as an honour, but also a blessing that I shall forever be thankful for.

My sincerest gratitude also goes to all my esteemed professors, colleagues and friends. I also owe a million thanks to my family; particularly my sister, and my very dear grandmother whose mystical kindness and fervent prayers have helped me greatly.

Finally, I fall short for words when I come to express my gratitude for my parents to whom I dedicate this thesis; the greatest parents one could ever have. I do mean it when I say so: Blessed is the one who is to be brought up by people like them. Blessed is the one who has had a father like mine. Three years ago, my father was sitting here in the very first row, brimming with happiness and pride; today, I’m primarily motivated by my desire to impart the very same feelings to him. Though he is not here in person, I can strongly feel his fatherly affections; I can clearly see his encouraging smile, I can hear his applauding remarks; I can feel the generosity and modesty that used to emanate from him

to overwhelm me and anybody who got to know him. May he rest in peace; may God grant me the ability to always make him proud of me.

Most important of all, may God grant me the ability to show my gratitude for the guiding star of my life; the one person who miraculously alleviates my pain and brightens up my life; the one to whom I owe everything I possess and everything I accomplish; the one who smothers me with inexhaustible affection and unwavering care; the one who tirelessly and wholeheartedly exerts every effort just to draw a smile on my face; the one who lifts me up and endows me with strength and determination; the one whose life is pivoted on making me happy; the one who sacrifices, gives and forgives; the epitome of kindness, mercy, compassion, generosity, graciousness, elegance, beauty and all the world's blessings. Blessed is the one who has a mother like mine. Words fall short in expressing my feelings towards her, but the only thing I can do is to ask God to enable me to repay her one day, though a lifetime would not be enough.

Table of Contents

Preface	i
Chapter I Feminism and Feminist Criticism: A Life History	1
Chapter II Elaine Showalter: A Criticism of Her Own	62
Chapter III “Inventing Herself” and Others: A Gynocritical Analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s <i>Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter</i>	114
Chapter IV Women, Depression and Female Creativity: a Showalterian Reading of Sylvia Plath’s <i>The Bell Jar</i>	170
Chapter V The Psychodynamics of Female Criminality in Salwa Bakr’s <i>The Golden Chariot</i>	231
Conclusion	300
Bibliography	306

Chapter One

Feminism and Feminist Criticism: A Life History

For a thorough understanding of Showalter's contribution to feminist criticism, and how her gynocritical model establishes a common ground for women, catapulting them from their roles as "consumers" of male-authored works to "producers" of "A Literature of their Own" as can be evinced in the female bildungsroman (Showalter, "Towards" 146-47), it is essential to gain an understanding of the feminist enterprise against which she marshals her theories. This chapter gives a general overview of the story of feminism with particular emphasis on the efforts of American, French and Egyptian feminists to bring the "woman question" and female rights to the forefront. It also endeavours to give a brief history of the feminist movement, and the feminist mode of criticism it has subsequently engendered before moving on to an examination of Showalter's theories in the next chapter.

Simply defined, "feminism is the belief that women have the same human capacities as men" (Freedman, Introduction xi). Nowadays the words "feminism" and "feminist" are used to connote the ideas that advocate the emancipation of women and the supporters of and adherents to this cause. The origin of these terms can be traced back to late nineteenth-century France, when the term "*feminisme*" was first employed in French political discourse as a synonym for women's emancipation. The first self-proclaimed feminist was the French women's suffrage advocate Hubertinè Auclert who used the term in the periodical *La Citoyenne* (The Woman Citizen) to describe herself and her associates. This term was subsequently popularized and gained currency in the first feminist congress held in Paris in 1892. Shortly thereafter, the term "*feminisme*" was

viewed in juxtaposition to “*masculinism*”, to denote what is currently known as male chauvinism (Offen, *European* 19). By 1894-95, the terms “feminism” and “feminist” were circulated among other European countries, such as Great Britain, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and Russia, and subsequently reached the United States. Eventually, during the twentieth century, these two terms permeated non-Western discourses, including Arabic and Japanese (20). Feminism was also linked to the emergence of nation-states, political parties, philanthropic causes and workers’ movements (Akkerman and Stuurman 2). In this context, feminism came to be defined as “the political articulation of the collective organization of women” (2), or to use the words of the early feminist activist Carrie Chapman Catt,¹ it was “a worldwide revolt against artificial barriers which laws and customs interpose[d] between women and human freedom; an evolution, like enlightenment and democracy” (qtd. in Misciagno 4).

However, as a self-conscious movement, a self-conscious approach to literature and a critique of the subordination of women as a group by men within a given cultural setting, feminism developed only in the late 1960s (Abrams 233; Offen, *European* 20). Since the 1980s, feminist literary criticism has developed and diversified into a wide range of traditions, spawning an “explosion” of feminist writings “without close parallel in the history of previous critical innovations in a movement” (Abrams 234). Embracing this term empowered women with “a starting point for self-definition and the definition of their agendas” (Misciagno 2). Once coined and appropriated, this term burgeoned into widely divergent attitudes, beliefs and stances. Disparate as they are, all versions of feminism share a common goal: “A call for the redressment and reconfiguration of the sexual balance of power in virtually every area of human life” (Offen, Preface xv).

Though the terms “feminism” and “feminist” were first employed in the 1870s, and in spite of the fact that feminism became a self-conscious movement only in the 1960s and 70s, visible manifestations of it can be traced back to a time that predates the emergence of these terms. In fact, as early as the fifteenth century, humanist ideas about man’s capacity for reason inspired women to question their relegation to a secondary status.² At that time, deeply entrenched assumptions about women’s physical, moral and intellectual inferiority bolstered female unconditional obedience to patriarchal authority. In an attempt to counter these misogynist inequities, some outstanding women of the time, who had access to some measure of education, used their knowledge to undermine negative stereotypes of women as evil, ignorant or frivolous (Freedman, Introduction xi-xii). The letter presented by Christine de Pizan, an Italian-born French writer and author of *Le Livre de la Cité des Dammes* (The Book of the City Of Ladies) (1405), to the French court in 1401, testifies to the presence of a feminist consciousness as early as the fifteenth century:

What are women? ... Are they serpents, wolves, lions, dragons, vipers or devouring beasts and enemies of the human race? ... But by God! If they are your mothers, your sisters, your daughters, your wives and your companions, they are yourselves and you yourselves are them. (qtd. in Akkerman and Stuurman 1)

In mapping out the history of feminism, Akkerman and Stuurman propose a provisional division, comprised of six major “waves”: late-medieval and Renaissance feminism (1400-1600); rationalist feminism (1600-1700); Enlightenment feminism (1700-1800);

utopian feminism (1820-50); liberal feminism (1860-1920); and finally, contemporary feminism (1960-) (2).

To begin with, the medieval perception of women was based, on the one hand, on an inherent “female malleability” and a “perceived absence of a moral and rational core to her behaviour” (Rubin 36). Much to their detriment, such a lopsided image disqualified women from holding positions of leadership, guidance or responsibility. On the other hand, they were perceived to be better recipients of codes of morality and honour, dictated by patriarchs and priests. Throughout the medieval economy, women’s work was constricted only to the hearth and domestic chores. The guidebook to married life maintained that all women’s actions, decisions and thoughts must be conducted under the aegis of the husband (37-41). Medieval literature also played an instrumental role in consolidating these patriarchal values. A notorious example in this regard was *The Roman de la Rose* (The Romance of the Rose), an allegorical epic poem written by Guillaume de Lorris around 1237, and continued around 1275-80 by Jean de Meun, to be subsequently translated into other European languages in the fourteenth century (Rubin 42). To a great extent, it was to undermine such a vituperative depiction of women that Christine de Pizan took up her pen, decrying de Meun’s book, and establishing herself as a foremother to subsequent generations of women activists.³ As such, Pizan’s work signalled a turning point in the history of women since she was the first to call attention to the inherent sexism of highly-acclaimed literary works. For centuries afterwards, European writers invariably grappled with the *querrelles de femmes* or the “woman question” in response to her work. A chief concern of *querrelles* authors was the compilation of lists of famous, talented or learned women. Moreover, *querrelles* authors

were particularly concerned with the rampant denigration and negative depiction of female figures by men in written documents. Ultimately, this tradition gave rise to the genre of the catalogues and lexica of learned women, or more accurately, the *femme savante*. The model of the *femme savante* was subsequently embraced by many female authors who struggled to gain ascendancy in the male-dominated realm of letters (Akkerman and Stuurman 11-12; Rang 50). Fortunate for them, their struggle for recognition in the realms of culture and letters bore its fruits, and as a result, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the female author had become an undeniable part of the European intellectual world, though the status of women writers and intellectuals remained highly contested. The *savantes* made the best use of the rising salon culture and regularly attended public lectures. Having succeeded in gaining a foothold in the realm of letters through the open yet not institutionalized salons and public lectures, they worked on gaining access to the new institutions of scientific learning that were emerging all over Europe. Much to their dismay, however, they were denied admittance to them (Akkerman and Stuurman 12; Stuurman 75). In this respect, seventeenth-century feminism was “a broad and vigorous, though not organized intellectual movement” (Stuurman 67). The publication of texts supporting women reached its zenith in the 1640s, begetting a relatively “autonomous feminist discourse”, more “vigorous” and “self-assertive” than the one expounded in *querrelles* literature (67).

Seventeenth-century feminism sparked varied responses, ranging from ardent endorsement to scathing vituperation. In other words, while the ideal of the cultured woman was extolled, there emerged a hostile discourse that disparaged it. Among the most influential figures who championed the cause of women at the time was Marie de

Gournay whose *Egalité des Hommes et des Femmes* (Equality of Men and Women) (1622) is generally regarded as the first egalitarian feminist treatise in European history (Stuurman 68). Throughout her book, she made a strong case for the equality of the sexes, grounded in men's and women's common possession of reason, and also reiterated that women's lack of education and knowledge underlay their inferior status (Offen, *European* 34). Complementing her argument was the one put forth by the cleric Poullain de la Barre in 1673, who, unlike most learned men of his time who viewed women as physically and mentally inferior, condemned male superiority as the oldest, most widespread and deeply ingrained prejudice. The crux of his egalitarian argument was an ungendered view of the faculty of reason, culminating in his famous proclamation "the mind has no sex" (qtd. in Stuurman 76). These libertarian arguments unleashed a plethora of publications that addressed the marginalized status of women and made a strong case for the equality of the sexes. Consequently, during the final decades of the seventeenth century, a host of learned women disseminated into different domains and continued to attract public attention. Though France was largely the spawning ground for feminist thought, various critiques of women's disadvantaged position were launched and perpetuated in different countries.⁴ In short, as Stuurman maintains, "by their criticism of ancient patriarchal certitudes, feminist writers of the seventeenth century helped to clear the way for an overall attack on traditional morality and customary authority" (80).

The eighteenth century witnessed an unprecedented demand for female equality. Though this crusade had already started before the advent of the Enlightenment tradition, it peaked in the eighteenth century, as evidenced by the ever-increasing number of participants in it, and the veritable upsurge of printed critiques of the extant patriarchal

order (Offen, “Reclaiming” 86). Throughout the eighteenth century, issues that pertained to the emancipation of women proliferated into different domains. Broadly speaking, it was an era of liberation for both men and women, underlain by the Enlightenment goal of liberating humanity from the shackles of traditional authority. In their attempt to impose order on a world they had deemed chaotic and fragmented, Enlightenment thinkers drew on Sir Isaac Newton’s rational paradigm and appropriated the doctrine of natural rights, or natural laws; that is, the belief that certain rights, known through the exercise of reason, are inherently allocated to Man (86).

Paradoxically, however, the exaltation and assertion of the primacy of human reason buttressed claims of male supremacy, as Donovan explains: “Inherent in the vaunting of human (male) reason is the idea that rational beings are the lords of creation and have the right to impose their (reason) on all those who lack it – women, non-human creatures and the earth itself” (3). Detractors of women’s emancipation thus deployed Newton’s theories to lend credence to their deprecation of women, as Donovan proceeds to explain: “The Newtonian paradigm presumed that all which did not operate according to reason, according to mathematical principles of mechanism, was Other; that is secondary, not significant, less than real, not nameable. Into this category fell women” (3). The Enlightenment exaltation of reason as an exclusively male prerogative was further reinforced by the separate sphere ideology; that is, the assumption that women belonged to the household as wives and mothers, and were accordingly denied admission to the public sphere and the workplace. By the middle and end of the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, social, economic and historical forces, on top of which was the industrial revolution, worked to exacerbate the demarcation between both spheres,

thus isolating women within the confines of the household under the aegis of patriarchal authority. Obviously, the inequity of this allegation lent credence to the rampant belief that women had no property rights, no control over inheritance or child custody, and no right to file a lawsuit (Donovan 3-5).

In their attempt to probe into the realities of human existence, which was often marshalled in terms of a juxtaposition between what was human and what was non-human; what was rational and what was not; and what was social and cultural and what was natural, Enlightenment philosophers, be it intentionally or unintentionally, catapulted women's subordinate position to the forefront of any political, social, economic or religious debate. In this respect, the eighteenth century may be rightly described as being "feminocentric", as Offen explains:

Enlightenment debate can thus be seen as a spawning ground ... for asserting women's equality to men, for criticizing male privilege and domination, for analyzing historically the causes and constructions of women's subordination and for devising eloquent arguments for the emancipation of women from male control. These were all defining features of that critical tradition we now call feminism, but which at the time remained a critique that had no name. (*European* 31)

Fortunately, this unnamed "critique" triggered an awareness that the relations between the sexes were neither divinely ordained nor determined exclusively by nature, but rather socially constructed. As a result, assertive claims for putative male supremacy were

countered with equally vehement claims for sexual equity and women's emancipation from ungrounded male authority. A host of vociferous liberal feminists accordingly set out to deploy the doctrine of natural rights to their own advantage.⁵ In this respect, the Enlightenment tradition may be said to have laid the groundwork for a full-blown feminist consciousness. Discussions and debates that pertained to the status of women increasingly gained momentum in Enlightenment Europe, out of which more radical changes in women's conditions evolved and developed; changes that culminated in 1789 with the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Inarguably, the French Revolution created a cultural and political watershed in European history, calling into question existing institutions and practices amongst which were the relations between the sexes and family organization. Though unintentionally, the French Revolution had not only contributed to the advancement of feminist claims that had come into being during the Enlightenment, but it also provided unprecedented opportunities for the amelioration of women's status as Offen explains:

Feminism was not born in 1789, but the onset of the revolution unleashed a spectacular eruption of well-formulated feminist concerns ... The gushing forth of feminist concerns articulated in France ... would spread relentlessly throughout Europe ... The first five years of the French Revolution provide an unparalleled historical laboratory for studying European gender politics.

(European 50)

In short, the vast promulgation of feminist concerns became a highly contested issue, invoking varied and often conflicting responses, not only in France, but also far beyond its borders.

The argument put forth by the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel attests to the deeply entrenched misogynist values of the time. “When women held the helm of government”, he maintained, “the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions ... by arbitrary inclinations and opinions” (qtd. in Offen, *European* 72). In a similar vein, the British philosopher Edmund Burke had not only condemned the revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), but he also denied women any substantial role in it (72). In contradistinction to these vituperative assaults, Mary Wollstonecraft published her seminal book *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), which was subsequently overshadowed by her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Though the latter is generally hailed as the first major work of feminist theory in history, several preceding feminist documents came into being in the course of the eighteenth century, as part of the revolutionary fervour that swept across the world.⁶ By appropriating the theories of the Enlightenment, and bringing them to bear on their marginalized status, those early feminists may be said to have paved the way for a subsequent full-blown feminist project. Of all these endeavours, the contribution of Wollstonecraft is the most memorable, “for her life and career exemplify the struggle for a language of feminism in the context of the Enlightenment” (Sapiro 124).⁷

However, the burgeoning feminist movement of the time, exemplified by Wollstonecraft’s contribution, was undercut by the ascendancy of Napoleon to power. As a result, female subordination and an exclusively domestic role for women were once