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Sheri S. Teppner and Feminism's Future

Abstract

Defines the "patriarchal feminist heroine" as an almost superhuman individual who exists within a patriarchal society without changing it. Sees a shift in Teppner's work from such individuals to a focus on groups and whole societies, which are more effective at causing social change.

Additional Keywords

Feminism; Heroines; Patriarchy and feminist heroines; Teppner, Sheri S.

Sheri S. Tepper and Feminism's Future

Beverly Price

At a recent science fiction convention, Samuel Delany posed a question which underlies a basic flaw in the writing of feminist fantasy: why are so many of the feminist heroines "men with tits"? One answer, the easy answer, is that this type of heroine is a reflection—good and bad—of the feminist movement upon which she is patterned. Such heroines are characterized as either magicians or warriors, sword-wielders or sorcerers, or even as sword-wielding sorcerers, and while the sword-and-sorcery heroine is an effective embodiment of political feminism, the backlash of hostility and violence directed towards feminism has resulted in the overcompensating adaptation of this model into an overachieving, nearly invulnerable, frequently omniscient, "ideal" heroine. Her literary progenitors are Ged, the sorcerer in Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* and Alyx, Joanna Russ' warrior heroine, but two "ideal feminist" types from popular culture have contributed to the invention of "patriarchal" feminist heroine: the Superwoman, the political feminist model, who is seen as competing with men on the man's terms and in the man's world, and who handles her femininity — as wife and/or mother — on her own time and in private; and the Earth Mother, the goddess-celebrating eco-feminist, who elevates femininity and motherhood to the status of a religion or an art form.

The goals and achievements of the patriarchal feminist heroine reflect an amalgamation of radical feminism and mainstream feminism. Radical feminism allows the patriarchal feminist heroine the opportunity to redefine "female" character traits and become multi-talented. Freed from the burden of being assigned characteristics which society deems unwanted and undesirable for the masculine ideal, such as modesty, passivity and chastity, she assumes and "acts out" formerly forbidden, "unwomanly" traits and expects society to alter itself in response to these changes. While the goal of radical feminism is to re-form the female, mainstream feminism aims to reform society by eliminating sexism from within "the system." It does not matter whether the mainstream heroine fights for or against the status quo in her efforts to eradicate the evils inherent in her society, since her reason for opposing it is to "reform" it. Thus, radical feminism provides the "means," or characteristics, and mainstream feminism provides the "ends," or purpose, for the patriarchal feminist heroine.

This amalgamation of radical and mainstream feminism creates an number of disturbing paradoxes. The first is the paradox of feminism itself. Radical feminism focuses on the "consciousness raising" of the individual, which

tends to shift the burden for change away from society and toward the individual woman. It encourages women to look to themselves, or to that small group of women with whom they share consciousness, as the source of their "liberation." In short, consciousness raising is an approach that deemphasized broad-based social action in favor of personal redemption (Hewlett 157-8).

On the other hand, mainstream feminism seems to have achieved a certain amount of social change by entering into a Faustian bargain with the patriarchy: in exchange for equality in the public arena, inequality in the private will be tolerated or excused as a "personal issue"; in exchange for equal access to the professions, inequality for working-class women will be tolerated or excused as a "social issue."

Should the patriarchal feminist heroine achieve the intrapersonal goals of the radical feminists while simultaneously achieving change from within the patriarchy, she runs the risk of replacing the patriarchy with an oligarchy. Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, provides an explanation as to how such an oligarchy could occur: she describes how the concept of gender inequality has been systematically constructed throughout history, yet rejects the simplistic notion that gender stratification is something men, as a group, do to women, as a group. Lerner cites evidence that upper-class women cooperated with upper-class men to profit from the development of class stratification, gender stratification, slavery and prostitution, first among foreigners, then among the lower classes of their own cities.¹ She further maintains that the oppression of women and children enabled a specific class of men—the upper-class rulers—to control other men.

By experimenting with the enslavement of women and children, men learned to understand that all human beings have the potential for tolerating enslavement, and they developed the techniques and forms of enslavement which would enable them to make of their absolute dominance a social institution (80-1).

Thus, the successful patriarchal feminist heroine runs the risk of gaining her own liberation at the expense of her less-gifted "sisters."

The final paradox created by the amalgamation of radical and mainstream feminism is that the emphasis on personal excellence coupled with the de-emphasis on social constructs suggests that the patriarchal feminist heroine is an isolated aberration in a strong, dominating patriarchal society. While this allows the heroine to appear as powerful, it also suggests that the dominator society is equally indomitable. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the patriarchy is neither as strong or as imper-

vious to change as the Herculean struggles of the patriarchal feminist heroine would suggest. Riane Eisler, Merlin Stone and others have theorized that at some point in the past societies founded on a system of cooperation and partnership models existed. Such societies rejected power as a means of governance and social control "to bring about a more just, peaceful, and ecologically harmonious social order" (Eisler 151). Eisler maintains that such partnership societies were not entirely eradicated by the rise of the dominator society, but are maintained within the patriarchy, largely by women, who incorporated the characteristics of the other society into the feminine model through such traits as compassion and mercy. She further theorizes that history cannot be defined as one long period of domination but fluctuates

from warlike to more peaceful times, from authoritarian to freer and more creative times, from periods when women are more repressed to times when, at least for some women, there is a broadening of educational and life opportunities (135).

Despite the paradoxes inherent in the patriarchal feminist model, she remains an effective focus for the expression of feminism. She cannot, however, be perceived as a feminist archetype. She is a prototype, a near-perfect, conscious characterization of contemporary feminist ideas, philosophies and aims existing within an isolated, largely-patriarchal environment, and she will, one hopes, improve as feminism itself improves.

Sheri S. Tepper's recent novels have shifted emphasis from the use of a feminist heroine to the creation of feminist landscapes, settings and cultures. By creating such feminist structures, Tepper enlarges feminism to a culture-wide or world-wide scale, which enables its successes and failures to be readily examined. Although the settings and the futures they represent differ in emphasis, each embodies a juxtaposition between contemporary feminist theories, assumptions, values, norms and structures and those of several other major institutions of the 20th century U.S. *After Long Silence* is set on a planet owned by a corporation. The society reflects the strengths and weaknesses of modern-day corporate values. The *Awakeners* series, *Northshore* and *Southshore*, emphasize nationalism at its best and worst. *The Gate to Women's Country* shows militarism's impact on feminism. In *Grass*, patriarchy itself is examined. In *Raising the Stones*, religious values and beliefs are in conflict. These juxtapositions allow feminism to be viewed within the context of the patriarchal institutions which caused its rebirth.

Tepper's earlier works indicate that she, too, utilized the patriarchal feminist heroine, yet chronicle the development of her multi-faceted cultures. Peter in *King's Blood Four* (1983) begins as an orphaned, powerless student who must overcome the betrayal of his friend and lover Mando to survive. Through the course of his adventures, in *Necromancer Nine* (1983) and *Wizard's Eleven* (1984), Peter's characterization is identical to the patriarchal feminist

heroine: he matures into an overachiever with extraordinary powers who reforms his society from within. In *Northshore* (1987), volume one of *The Awakeners*, heroism is a group activity, borne by several characters who derive strength from their various multi-cultural societies and use community efforts to defeat their patriarchy. In her most recent novel, *Raising the Stones* (1990), the role of the feminist heroine is diffused among the entire population of Hobbs Land and the ideals of feminism are incorporated quite literally into the planet itself.

Tepper utilizes structures — both man-made and natural — on the worlds she creates to symbolize those social structures which affect feminism in some manner. In *The Gate to Women's Country*, the walls, buildings and other structures physically represent the gender constraints the warriors and the women construct to keep their two societies separate. Women and servitors live inside the walls of the city while the warriors live inside the "walls" of the military structure of their garrison. Warriors hold their ceremonies in front of a statue which Stavia, the protagonist, and the warriors recognize and acknowledge as phallic (79), yet all fail to recognize the symbolic womb she and the women inhabit: the Well of Surcease, with its suggestions of symbolizing the source of life; the walls which enclose the city, shielding the inhabitants from the dangers outside; the small doors which are the only entrances and exits for warriors; and the Warrior's Plaza, a ceremonial arched space which

wept for spectators; the polished-stones of the plaza cried for marching feet, the rat-a-bam of drums, the toss of plumes, and the crash of lances snapped down in the salute, ker-bam! The plaza sniffed in abandonment, like a deserted lover. (3)

In addition to her depiction of physical landscapes, Tepper utilizes the dystopia as a mental landscape, enabling her protagonists to traverse the psychological landscapes of feminism. *The Gate to Women's Country* and *Grass* depict two very different dystopian perspectives of contemporary feminism. *Gate* examines radical feminism and the ways in which it has emphasized personal change at the expense of social change, while *Grass* examines mainstream feminism and how it allows for the achievement of individual equality while proscribing social change. *Gate's* theme is how radical feminism survives an apocalyptic war. An unforeseen consequence of the war causes a genetic trait for clairvoyance to develop in some of the males which supposedly causes them to feel pain when they are around aggressive or power-driven people. Because of this, they choose to live away from unaffected males, who still maintain the aggressive and militaristic tendencies which caused the war. The few women in the society who know of their condition (who call themselves "the damned few") see it as a way to "breed out" aggression, so they devise an elaborate charade whereby the women and the affected men (called servitors) live in walled-in cities while the unaffected men live outside as warriors ostensibly devoted to protecting the cities and the women.

On the surface, life inside the walls of Women's Country appears idyllic. The women and the servitors are encouraged to pursue physical, mental and intellectual excellence, and the "damned few" women and servitors consider themselves immune from the murderous instincts of the unaffected men and women while believing they are working toward a day when their descendants can live openly as equals. Gradually, Stavia learns that the supposed distinction between the two groups is a sham: the "damned few" women and servitors, too, are murderers and aggressors. "Equality" is achieved by the deception of, and eventual murder and involuntary sterilization of, those men and women who cannot or will not accept equality — the men if they are not genetically predisposed to it and the women if they are not intellectually predisposed to it. In the end, Stavia accepts her society as it is, passively participating in its rituals.

In *Grass*, upper-class women like protagonist Marjorie Westriding Yrarier have achieved nominal legal equality with the men. Instead of a patriarchy, Marjorie's society is a conservative, religion-driven oligarchy. Only legally-born persons have citizenship rights, and they can lose those rights if they have more children than the law allows. Illegals who have children are executed; despite this, birthcontrol is forbidden. Hence, the society is composed of a small elite group of citizens (who have access to illegal birth control devices) and a large, poor, desperate mass of illegals. Marjorie heads a social service organization which administers to the illegals. Like a contemporary patriarchal feminist, Marjorie's energies are devoted to improving her society from within, including breaking the laws herself, even though she realizes that without implementing large-scale social reforms, her efforts are useless: "So long as Sanctity ruled, there was no legal way to do anything significant. Every week there would be a new girl pregnant or about to be, on and on, forever. If Marjorie spent everything she had, money and blood, it would do no lasting good" (34).

Marjorie then travels to Grass, a planet where humans are immune to a plague for which there is no cure. She discovers that the plague has been created by the Hippae, the natives of Grass whose only drive and desire is to humiliate, torment and kill anyone or anything different from them. Their plan is to kill all humans living off-planet, leaving a breeding stock of humans on Grass as their playthings. Marjorie succeeds in stopping the Hippae, and is able to grasp the similarities between the rapacity of the Hippae and that of the oligarchy on Earth, which planned to hoard the cure until most of the illegals had died from the plague, yet she is unwilling to return to Earth and confront its society; instead, she elects to leave it forever.

Stavia's passive acceptance of her radical feminist dystopia and Marjorie's passive withdrawal from her patriarchal feminist dystopia imply the repudiation of the belief that either movement can be changed from within. Tepper depicts both as failed, potentially destructive institutions and both protagonists must find a way to separate themselves from them in order to survive. In *Raising the Stones*,

she offers a potential alternative to both radical and mainstream feminism. In it, she constructs a healthy feminist society emerging from the chaos of both patriarchy and feminism. On Hobbs Land the voluntary exiles from such societies assemble and build a new, heterosexual culture, composed of the most egalitarian, non-competitive elements of their old societies but physically separate from them, and where diversity is considered essential to maintain a healthy society. Because they first physically separated from the old cultures then grew in strength and conviction, they were never forced to compromise their emerging values and ideals in order to appease the fears and hatreds of the destructive societies which challenge their right to exist — the High Baidee of Thyker, with their stratified, exclusionary oligarchy, and the Voorstoders of Scaery, with their murderous, slave-holding patriarchy. The High Baidee, formed accidentally by Marjorie Westriding Yrarier, are pseudo-intellectual goddess worshippers who construct elaborate rationalizations for their intolerance and paranoia. The Voorstoders, a society composed of remnants of three of Earth's religions, are mindless murderers who long before ceased to question why they kill; they kill or enslave anything and anyone different, and consider themselves freemen only if they are able to kill with impunity.

Sam Girat, born a Voorstoder but raised on Hobbs Land, tries to understand the confusions caused by his failure to make a clean break from the society — and father — he left as a child. Searching for answers, he rediscovers classic Greek mythology and uses it to compose legends and stories to explain the homeland he left as a child. For him the society on Voorstod must make sense, since he identifies it with his Voorstoder father, Phaed, and seeks to understand his motives for living in a society with so much hate. Since Sam cannot accept the fact that his father is as insane as the society in which he lives, he rejects his own senses and feelings and tries to see the world from Phaed's psychotic perspective. He is gullible where his father is concerned: he wants him to be a good man in bad company, capable of reforming, he wants to believe his father would not lie to him or hurt him, and he chooses not to see or hear any evidence to the contrary. This "blindness" causes the other Hobbs Landians to fear Sam. They can see that his identification with his father is making his mind sick.

Sam then uses the legends and stories he has constructed from historical accounts to train himself to act as a classic Campbellian hero as defined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He conjures up the image of Theseus to train himself in the art of heroism and he acquires the accoutrements of a hero — sword belt, helmet — awaiting the day when he will take up the sword, retreat from the world of Hobbs Land, and atone with his father to do great deeds. For Sam, the "symbolic deficiency" of Hobbs Land is its lack of legends, or lack of history and creative symbolism. When he receives his "call to adventure" and must return to Voorstod, he goes expecting the world and its people to respond according to the legend he has studied. Instead, the quest becomes a mirror image of Campbell's.

Supernatural aid is provided, not by an old crone but by a young girl, Saturday, who is using Sam's quest in order to plant the Hobbs Landian god on Voorstod and stop the violence. Instead of nature (the God) assisting Sam, he assists it. At the entrance to the gate to Voorstod, he encounters a High Baidee, Shanrandinore Damzel, who, far from wanting to guard Hobbs Land, secretly plans to destroy it. Once on Voorstod, Sam expects to encounter "a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (97). Instead, the Voorstoders are unambiguous and easily understood and Sam's success or failure irrelevant. In place of the Great Goddess is a psychotic man, the head prophet; the Temptress is his father, who tries to brainwash Sam into becoming a Voorstoder. Sam's atonement with his father becomes an atonement with and acceptance of his mother once Sam outgrows his childish dependence on the image of a masculine ideal his father represented. Sam's apotheosis is his ability to go beyond the complacency of ignorance to the terrors of enlightenment. He becomes psychologically androgynous: having rejected his mother's values, he rejects his father's, leaving him egotless. Instead of breaking free from spiritual limitations, he accepts limitations at last.

When Sam returns to Hobbs Land, he arrives as an empty vessel. He has nothing to give to the Hobbs Landians. His quest, instead of saving his society, has endangered it, since it focuses the psychotic attention of the Voorstoder and the High Baidee on the Hobbs Landians. Sam's ambition to be a hero and save his society suggests a parallel between his motives and those of the patriarchal feminist heroine. They both strive to assume the ideal, all-inclusive traits they believe are necessary to the hero/heroine, and they both seek to reform from within the society with which they identify. Yet Sam, acting alone, fails, while the Hobbs Landians, acting as a group, succeed.

Freed from the obligation to be larger-than-life, Tepper's protagonists stand out as welcome alternatives to the patriarchal feminist heroine. There are no gender or role constraints: she strives for a balanced proportion of "heros" (Sam Girat in *Raising the Stones*, Tasmin Ferrence in *After Long Silence*) and "heroines" (Stavia Morgot's daughter in *The Gate to Women's Country*, Marjorie Westriding Yrarier in *Grass*). Regardless of gender, her protagonist's point of view is that of a middle-class U.S. feminist observing her society. While viewing their societies from the perspective of a feminist intellectual—the artist/singer (*After Long Silence*), the professional/scientist (*The Gate to Women's Country*), the social scientist/activist (*Grass*), and the administrator/writer (*Raising the Stones*), they traverse their worlds uncovering, not discovering, the evils in their society, learning how the structures of their society operate, and leaving chaos and unrest in their wake. In *After Long Silence* and *Raising the Stones*, co-heroines join the protagonist in her quest and perform the tasks required of the Campbellian hero/heroine—healing the society. As a result, the

societies and the lives of the people inhabiting them are both radically altered. By contrast, in *Grass* and *The Gate to Women's Country* the heroine acts virtually alone, and alone cannot effect the changes the societies need: the heroines are changed, but the evil in their societies still flourish.

In criticizing the patriarchal feminist heroine, Samuel Delany was not suggesting that such heroines should not be as strong as heroes, but recommending that they not be as limited as heroes. The independent hero imposes changes which are finite, while a community of heroines can supplant the flawed society. Sheri S. Tepper's incorporation of feminist values into the settings and landscapes of the worlds she creates frees her heroines from the necessity of appearing super-human and extra-ordinarily gifted. This allows their actions to be viewed as allegorical rather than idealistic, as representing societal forces and factors rather than individual characteristics and traits. The depiction of multiple cultures existing within the society of the novel and multiple heroines acting on these societies allows for the expression of social change on a scale larger than that which can be caused by an individual character. When the feminist society is allowed expression free from the pathologies of homosocial, power-driven, dominator societies, it is strengthened by encouraging cooperation rather than competition, freed from fear and paranoia as motivating factors, and welcoming of diversity. ¶

Note

1. Lerder maintains (123-140) that the current practice of veiling women originated because there was needed some system of differentiating between upper-class "respectable" women and "not respectable" prostitutes and slaves. Laws were developed (Gerdner cited the *Middle Assyrian Laws*, trans. by Theophile J. Meek) which punished the "not respectable" women for trying to pass as upper-class women by wearing veils and punished the men who failed to denounce women violators. There was no law punishing an upper-class woman for failing to wear a veil (136-7).

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