

Politics of Gender Roles, Sexuality and Androgyne in the Early Works of Ernest Hemingway Critical Reassessment

1. Dr. P. Venkanna,

Assistant Professor of English,

Guru Nanak Institute of Technology, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

2. Dr. G. Pavani

Associate Professor of English, Guru Nanak University Hyderabad

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Abstract:

The shift in Hemingway's studies away from traditional biography, gender and textual studies has enabled new critical responses over the past thirty years to focus on several new and disparate approaches which reflect the broader evolution in literary criticism. Hemingway's novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1939), once considered critically exhausted, are being rejuvenated by a rising generation of scholars utilizing a variety of perspectives to deal with man-woman relationship through critical and theoretical lenses. Though Hemingway died 57 years ago he remains very much alive in the minds of readers and critics around the world. New dimensions of his work are discovered and explored, proving to each successive generation of readers ample scope to critically examine new perspectives about man-woman relationships in his early fictional works.

Literary criticism has been changing in the wake of reader response and feminist criticism with its emphasis on sexuality and gender. Critics have not only reevaluated Hemingway's ideas about gender and sexuality but also the female characters throughout his oeuvre. Earlier Hemingway criticism had been largely "the province of male critics with overly simplistic views of Hemingway's female characters. For example, Catherine Barkley of *A Farewell to Arms* was praised for being an utterly compliant woman, while her strengths and departures from conventional gender roles were completely ignored" (Comely 416). Brett Ashley the female protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises* was excoriated for being just the opposite, while her trauma as an abused wife was glossed over by critics. In the wake of feminist criticism in the 1970s, more attention has been paid not only to the complexity of Hemingway's female characters but also to Hemingway as a more complex and interesting writer capable of registering subtleties about man-woman relationships and sexuality that defy easy or simple categorizations.

Key Words: Traditional biography, man-woman relationship, emphasis on sexuality and gender.

Introduction:

The study aims to consider the subject of man-woman relationships treated by Hemingway in his major and representative works, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Evaluating and applying the literature that deals with man-woman relationships, in general, is a more complex task than evaluating the relevant negative criticism of Hemingway's female characters alone. Major themes and images on this subject emerge more clearly the more one reads Hemingway, and since the topic is broad, only relevant gender views in his three novels are considered. Hemingway while depicting man-woman relationships in his short stories and novels was ill at ease as he had undergone painful experiences with his four wives. The thesis, therefore, while considering several questions on this subject has established a proper frame of reference in which serious concerns about gender issues have been thoroughly examined.

While discussing Hemingway's views on male dominance and female subjugation the study comprehensively deals with several mixed reviews from critics who either present female characters as complaint, lacking and strong sense of self or as heroic by others. In contrast to these negative appraisals, feminist critics praise them as code heroes of the novels for their admirable qualities of commitment to life and love. One of the important observations about sexual politics in all three novels is that masculine eroticism confines women, therefore, it implies that sexual friendships are inversely related to man-woman relationships. In traditional canonship situations, the woman's power is the power to be pursued but once caught she strengthens her opportunity to choose. Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* keeps her options open to diversify her investment of social and sexual energy to maximize her opportunities. Brett, despite being labelled as a woman devoid of womanhood and "a compulsive bitch" breaks free of patriarchal control to assert her independence from male domination. She openly rebels against 19th-century Victorian moral priorities. She rejects established social conventions and feminine ideals of chastity and submission. Instead, she insists on freedom of self-expression and a voice in the social sphere.

In the context of changing gender hierarchies Jake, Frederic and Robert Jordan come to terms with their partners Brett, Catherine and Maria serve as examples of the "New Women" of the "Lost Generation." These female characters had the guts to enter into a public sphere which was dominated by men. They were bold enough to wear revealing "gender appropriate" clothing branded with the latest styles. They not only bobbed their hair but also boldly expressed their sexuality redefining their femininity by flaunting their gender roles. Upholding their dignity they were reluctant to accept their "pawn-like status" to submit to every aspect of social and cultural norms. They were aware of the benefits of having "gender roles blurred by viewing women not as their slaves but as their partners." As evidenced by Brett and Jake's relationship as well as Maria and Robert's relationship experimenting with gender roles fairly improved their bonds Fiedler 122. This sort of bonhomie between men and women led to progressive societies and improved quality of life. They became

consciously aware of the post-war feminine consciousness by reconciling that men and women should set aside gender binaries and work together for progressive societies.

In most of his works, Hemingway comprehensively analyzes gender confusion and sexual ambiguity which must be exhaustively dealt with to examine man-woman relationships which were portrayed as historical expressions of gender issues quite often debated in the late twenties and thirties. Judging masculinity and gender anxiety, he recognizes attractions as well as threats of possible alternate viewpoints. There is an acute awareness of the inadequacy of conventional forms of masculinity and the necessity to consider how gender reversal roles impact man-woman relationships in *The Sun Also Rises*. This aspect though, can only be possible “once the threat of woman’s intrusion into what are seen as male zones, or the worry that such ‘feminisation’ will lead to the loss of distinctive male difference, has been fictionally depicted in *The Sun Also Rises*. His representation of the ambiguous desires of the male subject marks him as a writer whose explorations of gender and sexuality are not only both central to his work but complicated” (Kimmel 125).

The subject of man-woman relationships, gender roles and sexual identity in *The Sun Also Rises* varies from the male point of view and serves as an alternative female perspective to suggest his awareness of the uncertainty of conventional gender hierarchies. This can be related to the changes in man-woman relationships that provide the historical, social and political background to the novel’s contemporary relevance. Although Hemingway’s novel confirms male power and sexual authority, it does not necessarily mean that he was favourably disposed to the male point of view. The reversal of gender roles in the fictional explorations on the subject of man-woman relationships gives concrete proof of vague forms of sexual desire and suggests severe anxieties about traditional binaries that could never easily be resolved. Postwar feminism was prominent in Paris in the early period of the 1920s. Although very few feminists would have agreed that the recognition of women’s sexuality amounted to liberation, many women Hemingway encountered in Paris were highly glamorized “flappers” who were “dancing, smoking and drinking in public and consorting with men of their own choice” (Martin 67).

The Sun Also Rises received a thorough reappraisal of Hemingway’s inquiry into gender issues based on that novel’s popularity and mass appeal with pliable gender and, sexual roles as significant themes of the novel. The critical revaluation had not reverted Hemingway’s “macho image” reputation. He worked very hard to change that image, but it has turned his concerted attempts to depict man-woman relationships in his fiction into a virtue. Though Hemingway’s heroes hold on to the idea of “grace under pressure” they find it sometimes difficult to strike a compatible relationship with their women.. Hemingway has a much broader definition of love and he examines it in many types of relationships and under many different conditions. Such early stories as “The End of Something,” “My Old Man,” and “The Battler,” indicate that Hemingway was less concerned with the outward form of a relationship and whether it conformed to the standard perception of a love relationship – heterosexual love that ends in marriage – than with the inner workings of such

relationships.

Jeryl J. Prescott commenting on gender equality in his work “Liberty for Just: Gender and Sexuality in Hemingway’s Fiction” observes that Hemingway was making use of feminist rhetoric of rage; economy of metonymic displacement to highlight perceived gender and racial differences within a society that claims to foster equality yet disagrees on gender inequality in man-woman relationships. Hemingway depicts uncensored male perceptions of females perhaps as a biased reason for why women allow subjugated positions in American society.

Prescott concludes: Man-woman relationships in the novel reflect the contemporary sex role patterns prevalent in the twenties and in many ways, it signals Hemingway’s rejection of traditional Victorian moral values under which he was brought up. As an artist, Hemingway had lived a bohemian life. As an expatriate in Europe, he witnessed the shifting gender and sexual roles in the twenties. His heterosexual sensibilities were equally changed to suit the new social environment in which he lived. He did not believe that the pre-war society had changed everything. The traditionally inclined Robert Cohn had not changed a bit and still pursued his romantic flirtations with women.

Normal man-woman relationships are not possible when a man degrades and disgraces himself by surrendering to the whims and fancies of a woman. The relationship between Brett and Jake, Robert Cohn and Frances Clyne, Pedro Romero, Bill Gorton and Mike Campbell’s relationship with Brett are classic examples of mismatched couples who can never have satisfying mutual relationships. The men in Brett’s life are enamoured of her sex appeal and go out of their way to please her. They worship her and Dance to her tunes. Jake desperately begs her to live with him. But Jake ironically acts as the pimp for her when he sets her up with Pedro Romero. He prostitutes his passion to serve her needs. Montoya, the high priest of the bull cult, does not approve of Jake’s irresponsible behaviour in pimping Brett to Romero and expresses his displeasure by simply ignoring him when he meets him at the hotel.

Androgyny helps in fostering better and improved forms of social and sexual relations between men and women. The social and historical conditions in which Hemingway lived enabled him to portray these relations as a more threatening version of those that were already in operation in the early twenties. Androgyny is initiated by the female partner and is related to the lack of power she holds in the actual social sphere. Androgyny in *A Farewell to Arms* and the feminisation of the wounded male hero in *The Sun Also Rises*, reflect the failure of masculine authority. Hemingway, in dealing with this issue “manages these contradictions of sexual ideology by presenting all these conflicting urges and positions in his fiction but only as a prelude to closures that safely reassert traditional versions of man-woman relations” (Kristine 79). The macho emblems that scatter the plots of Hemingway’s novels are countered by emasculation both physical and psychological among a few of his fictional heroes in their relationship with women. They are not only guilty but also feel

insecure about their sexual identity. Hemingway's image as an iconic "he-man" of America received a severe blow when his biographers exposed his problematic sexual inadequacies in their writings. These revelations of Hemingway as a male culture hero having cheated hard drinking adventurer revealed the negative side of his personality. Both M.H. Miller and Kenneth Lynn examined Hemingway's life and fiction to show how serious concerns about gender roles and sexuality gave exaggerated interpretations make any remaining attempt to consign him to the 'cult of masculinity' Much of Hemingway criticism in the late twentieth century is concerned with relating his life and works to the changing patterns of man-woman relationships in the context of American cultural life from the era of the lost generation.

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* opens up a lively debate about how gender conflicts play a role considering the female gender as inferior to the male gender. In both these novels, Hemingway examines how women are keen to explore their sexualities with their male counterparts to defy their role in their relationships as inferiors. Women should have the courage to assert "masculine" traits without being branded as a "bitch" or a "whore" This leads to several questions regarding the possibility of multiple genders like "male" and "female" in American socio-cultural life. Hemingway's concept of gender is generally considered by sociologists as "fluid and increasingly unstable as societies progress.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, we can perceive the gender bias against Catherine Barkley and critics who have devalued her as lacking in character because she has chosen to define herself in terms of a one-sided relationship. They have failed to see her subordination of the individual ego to a personal relationship as a mark of maturity. She redefines love as the only desire on her part to serve and assures Frederic that love is a "religious thing".

Michael Reynolds's commenting on Hemingway's phrase observes that "the lost generation world is lost ... to modern times and is particularly revealing here. The forms and themes, contradictions and tensions, man-woman relationships of Hemingway's work relate directly to his response to modernity and its conditions" (127). Hemingway has been consistently sympathetic and considerate to women, who are quite often revealed to be more perceptive, intelligent and mature than their mates. Although in their world Hemingway's men possess an implied "code of stoic manliness by which to prove themselves, in their relationships with women that code does not ensure success." Men should have been more passive in response to women; they should have been more insensitive, willing or able to accept responsibility for the way things eventually turn out. Hemingway thought that the contrast between the sterility of contemporary sexual relations and the regenerative positive "force of primordial impulses" are the prime factors that keep the gender equations tenable.

In conclusion, Hemingway's fictional treatment of gender issues originated from his psychological problems after the Great War and his personality was shaped by biographical and historical circumstances. He was deeply concerned about the popularity and increasing influence of women writers within the literary world. Hemingway's depiction of women

characters reaffirms his belief in patriarchal power in the American context and provides valuable insight into understanding myths related to the theories of androgyny, wounds and the concept of “code hero.” Reinterpreting Hemingway’s fictional works in the light of new ideas emanating from multicultural studies allows us to reassess male androgyny, lesbianism and bisexuality.

Hemingway’s celebrated exploits in writing and life positioned him as an ideal spokesman for offering his brand of masculinity to Americans. His fictional works in which deviations from gender and sexual standards of his time motivated not only some of his own life choices but also the plots and characters of his non-fiction. A study of Hemingway in a socio-cultural context thus involves dealing with not only gender roles, androgyny and man-woman relationships but also various situations in which he lived and wrote his fictional and non-fictional works. The thesis, therefore, addresses the variety of ways in which Hemingway and his work have been presented to readers over the past 80 years. His changing attitude toward man-woman relationships as well as his complex relationships with the women he married complement and illuminate each other while also demonstrating how critical inquiry into Hemingway’s work has changed since critics and readers started to take notice of him and his work in the 1920s.

The thematic universe of Hemingway’s work is quintessentially cosmopolitan. It is a world haunted by violence, loss and post-war trauma that affected man-woman relationships which were proven to fragmentation and disillusionment. It is a universe of gender and sexual fluidity and a post-Freudian awareness of unconscious forces.

Hemingway’s endurance as a compelling cultural figure arguably extends from the fact that his well-known persona is constructed along fault lines of gender, man-woman relationships, sexuality, race, and nationality that continue to shift and rumble beneath our feet. Hemingway’s dynamic authorial image is not coherent, but it carries the traces of a man who forged a public and private identity profoundly in touch with some of the defining issues, anxieties, and aspirations of American life.

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