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Reliving Woman's History through New Eyes: A Study of Women's Electronic Literature and the Shifting Women's Faces in Historical Fiction

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Abstract

Literature has spilled over from the pages of printed books to electronic media now. One holds a thousand books in the palm of his/her hands at will, and also there is a surge of writers writing online fiction. "Chick-lit" or woman's literature being one of the most popular genres, a considerable fraction of this umbrella genre overlaps with the category of historical fiction (or historical romance). It is with this genre that my paper shall critically engage with. One finds interesting outcomes when, living in, what debatably is, a post-feminist age and experiencing the womanist lifestyle on a daily basis, the online authors of today look back at the feminist movements from their modern perspectives. Can their heroines be the same as those in the time of the Bronte sisters or Austen? Of course not. The perspectives have greatly changed through the various movements affecting literature and society in the meantime. This paper shall aim to trace the effects of the changing face of feminism in the representation of women in the book lover's social media sites. To that purpose, the paper shall take into study some of the most popular authors of historical romance like Robert Thier, appearing on the hot lists of applications like Wattpad and Radish Fiction.

Keywords: *Womanism, Electronic Literature, Representation, History, Gender*

Introduction

The virtues of printed books versus that of eBooks has been a long-standing debate among men and women related to the academics. Yet, we are aware of the barriers of publication, which have been a concern for writers of all ages and times. In order to bridge this gap between the authors and readers, the developers brought online websites and mobile applications that allowed instant publication of the works an author, where the only necessary criterion is to have an account in that particular website. Wattpad has been the most popular website for these kinds of efforts.

Wattpad began its journey in 2006. It started as “a mobile reading app,” says Allen Lau, Wattpad’s co-founder and CEO. “Ivan (Yuen, co-founder of Wattpad) was one step ahead of me and in addition to a mobile reading app he also created a website which allowed people to share their writing on mobile devices. Once we discovered we were working on a similar idea we decided to start a company.” However, Lau didn’t expect the initial growth to be among young female users. “It wasn’t really our intention. We wanted to create a place for people to share their writing and that’s actually pretty generic. I believe the younger generation are at such an age where they are more perceptive to new ideas and new concepts, and that’s why it started taking off”, he said.

The reception of their efforts might be reflected through the eyes of teenage girls. We can study the case of Hazal Kirci, a 17 year old blogger, as representative. Hazal Kirci was introduced to it by friends. She slowly became addicted, clicking and double-clicking her way through until her online “library” was full of romance and the paranormal. She had downloaded the app on to her tablet and when she found that she could read stories offline, a reading marathon began, often finishing 40-chapter stories in a day. Gradually, she found it exhilarating. So much so that she abandoned the so-called “real” fiction for a while, relishing instead the heaps of clichés that populated practically every story she read. And as most readers know, stories have an uncanny ability to spark one’s own creativity and inspiration. So she began writing and uploading her own stories.

Now, her story has attracted around twelve thousand views, more than two hundred likes and a stream of comments, all of which offered her motivation and the giddy happiness to keep on going. As a social platform, Wattpad grew through word of mouth between teenagers – it’s now a craze in several countries around the world. Alongside her friends, twenty five million others also read and write on the website, collectively having uploaded around forty million stories in Wattpad.

The population of websites like Wattpad and Radish Fiction are not entirely female, though they are the majority here. The platform is not built or designed in favour of a particular gender, yet Wattpad authors like Nick Usoski has made surveys showing that women are about ten percent more likely to read in sites like Wattpad. Besides, “the under thirty demographic,” he says, “are more likely to read compared to any other age group.”

The contents of these sites may be varied, but Romance is undoubtedly the predominant one. Romance is a genre over which women have almost total control, both as readers and authors. Therefore we realize that romance is a genre predominantly read and written by women, and it might be possible to draw a parallel to Adrienne Rich’s concept of “Lesbian Continuum” (Rich 1976) if one assumes the entire genre of romance to be a miniature reflection of social tastes. As Rich propounds, the “Lesbian Continuum” entails a wholly female society which is self-sufficient and uninfluenced by external agencies. If we wonder why women read Romance at all, the likeliest answer might be that

they find a comfort in the clichéd plots and besides, they may perhaps find elements in the novelistic heroes that might be absent in real-life male figures.

Feminist scholars like Kay Mussell and Tania Modleski speaks strongly against the genre of Romance, especially Harlequins. Mussell contends that “as an art, [romances] are profoundly unsatisfying and profoundly derivative, for they represent a pathetic attempt to make dramatic a story that seems to lack resonance” (Mussell FR 189). Though Modleski concedes “not all female longings and desires expressed in Harlequins are regressive” (Modleski FWW 49), eleven years later she asserts “romances provide women with a common fantasy structure to ensure their continued psychic investment in their oppression” (Modleski FWW 344). This makes us wonder what power lay behind the genre of Romance.

Historical Romance is powerful in its own way. It represents empowered female protagonists who subvert the traditional expectations of women’s role in their society, and in this way, challenging the readers to ponder about contemporary society’s expectations of beauty, love, a woman’s role in family and such ideas that patriarchy insists on associating with women. Even though these books are not set in our time period, the ideology against which their protagonists struggle is still both powerful and relevant. By looking at the past through the lens of the present, we can see that these novels provoke a re-evaluation of society’s expectations in three ways: one, by giving women an identity, two, by making women realize that they are unique and beautiful just as they are, and three, by encouraging the idea that women should view marriage as a choice — not just a societal expectation. Historical romance novels provoke a re-evaluation of society’s expectations for women because these novels give women an identity.

Here’s what Robert Thier, a 28 year old writer in both Wattpad and Radish had to say when I interviewed him. Robert Thier is a German Historian and writer of Historical Fiction. His particular mix of history, romance and adventure, always with a good deal of humor thrown in, has gained him a diverse readership ranging from teenagers to retired grandmothers. For the way he manages to make history come alive, as if he himself had lived as a medieval knight, his fans all over the world have given him the nickname “Sir Rob”. For him, Robert says, becoming a writer has followed naturally from his interest in history. “In Germany,” he says, “we use the same word for story and history. And I’ve always loved the one as much as the other. Becoming a storyteller, a writer, is what I’ve always wanted.” A Google search made him choose Wattpad in the very beginning and he had branched on to other paid sites later on.

His favourite historical classics include: ‘*The Count of Monte Christo*, by Alexandre Dumas, *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen, *Ivanhoe*, by Walter Scott, *North and South*, By Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Three Musketeers*, by Alexandre Dumas.’ (Thier) His favourite historical romances

among contemporaries are: *Outlander*, by Diana Gabaldon, *For the Roses*, by Julie Garwood, *One Corpse Too Many*, by Ellis Peters (A mixture of Mystery and romance.)' (Thier)

Here is his opinion about other paid sites like Radish fiction:

I think they are a great opportunity, both for readers and writers. For writers, especially once that are just starting out, they are a great way to experiment with becoming professional and slowly building up a readership without having to get past the roadblock of big agencies and publishers. For readers, they offer the opportunity of supporting their favorite writers and thus helping to make sure their favorite stories will continue and grow in the future. (Thier)

Regarding the general representation of women in historical romances, he prefers strong-willed, determined heroines. Due to the oppression women suffered during much of history throughout the world, such characters are not easily created or portrayed in a convincing manner.

"If they are—like Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, or Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*—that makes for a very good read. If they are not (for example, if someone were to write a "historical" novel about an openly female medieval knight, something which did not really exist) than the Historian in me itches to correct the historical inaccuracy" says Thier. But he dislikes it even more if the heroine lets herself be steamrolled by the supposed "hero", and allows her whole life be turned upside down, even though, in history, that would have been something that happened quite often. So he is of the opinion that the general representation of women in historical fiction walks a difficult path between historical accuracy and feminism that does not always result in a convincing book.

When asked about the differences between the heroines of a historical fiction and that of present day fiction, we see how male authors of today view the women of the past. Their feels that the present day fiction does not have to deal with the same problem that historical fiction encounters, namely that the reader has to be successfully drawn into a different world with different values in regard to women. Many – though definitely not all – historical fiction writers try to solve this problem by either making their heroines quite weak and submissive, to demonstrate historical accuracy, or ultra-modern and strong-willed in a way that does not fit their time period or situation. For historical fiction writers, this is one of the main challenges to overcome, and it is the main reason why he chose, for his historical fiction, heroines that lived in times and situation that challenged them beyond what was then considered usual – "Lilly in the time of the first suffragettes," (Thier SS 2016) and "Ayla with a sick father which forced her to take over some of his duties." (Thier TRK 2014) It is a difficult line to walk, particularly if you want to give the readers not only a convincing historical heroine, but also one they can identify with.

Robert Thier portrays heroines who are spunky and different. He had conceded that his heroines are partly influenced by historical personalities, but not really by other literary figures. Lilly, for example, was partly inspired by cross-dressing women who managed, during the 19th century, to secretly attend medical school or even become sailors, and partly by early suffragettes and feminists of the time.

The common trait among the heroines of his novels is 'free will'. His heroines fight for what they want until they get it. They might go about it in different ways, but they all have a certain underlying determination. The heroines, despite Sir Rob's claims of possessing a free will, are all complemented by competent male counterparts.

When asked whether he faces any difficulty in writing from a woman's point of view, he admits that he used to. But then he did an intensive course, reading nothing but book's from women's point of view for several months. "Everything from *The Hunger Games* to *Northanger Abbey*," he says. It paid off, and while he still has the occasional difficulty, he feels quite comfortable with writing a female perspective these days.

Robert Thier has a bone missing in his skull since birth, to which he refers while he speaks of the empowerment of women. He is quite emphatic, "Thanks to my various disabilities, I know what it is like to not be able to do things others can do. Yet whereas the difference between a disabled and healthy person is something physical, the difference between men and women, as far as rights and abilities go, exists only in the mind. Any laws or customs that stand in the way of achieving equality of genders, races or sexual orientations should thus be removed immediately."

From the above interview, we find an insight into the author's mind; the author, despite being male has succeeded in portraying female characters who subvert the normative practices in their contemporary society. By this Thier has provided his characters with the necessary agency to stand against the parochial mentalities of the social institutions that surrounds them. This throwback from the so called "weaker sex" instead of receding to the margins becomes even more significant when one finds it available over digital media without the expenses of an actual, tangible book to pay for.

The issue of women's agency has been an area of concern for feminists of all times. When one looks back at history, one realizes the lack of agency, and it is due to this lack, the women of today gains the scope of improving their situation. The disabilities of the historical women figures make the modern women feel the need for empowerment. Thus the disability becomes a locale where the possibility of empowerment is born. The success of historical fiction, besides making it to the hot lists, is to make their readers aware of the scope for bridging the gap between the empowered statuses of genders.

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