



Rewriting the Self: Feminist Identity Politics in Postmodern Literature

Fatima Saleem

Language instructor, Samtah University College, Jazan University

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Abstract— This paper explores the intersection of feminist identity politics and postmodern literature, examining how postmodern narrative strategies disrupt traditional constructions of the self and gender. By analyzing key texts from prominent postmodern feminist authors, the study illustrates how these works rewrite the notion of selfhood through fragmented, decentralized identities, thereby challenging patriarchal norms and enabling new feminist subjectivities. The paper also discusses the implications of such rewriting for feminist theory and broader socio-political discourses on identity.

Keywords— feminist identity politics, postmodern literature, selfhood, gender, subjectivity, narrative fragmentation



Introduction

The late 20th century witnessed significant transformations in intellectual, cultural, and political discourses, prominently marked by the rise of both feminist theory and postmodernism. These two critical movements, emerging from different but overlapping contexts, converged to profoundly interrogate and destabilize traditional understandings of identity, selfhood, and subjectivity.

Feminism, initially galvanized by second-wave movements in the 1960s and 1970s, centered on challenging institutionalized gender inequalities and patriarchal systems. Feminist theorists emphasized women's experiences, rights, and autonomy, interrogating societal structures that marginalized women. However, early feminist frameworks often relied on essentialist conceptions of 'womanhood,' treating women as a homogeneous category defined by biology or shared oppression. By the 1980s and 1990s, these essentialist models increasingly came under critique from feminists themselves, particularly through the lens of identity politics and intersectionality, which highlighted the diversity of women's experiences based on race, class, sexuality, and culture (Hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989).

Simultaneously, postmodernism emerged as a pervasive cultural and philosophical movement characterized by skepticism towards universal truths, grand narratives, and fixed meanings (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism questioned Enlightenment ideals of coherence, rationality, and progress, favoring instead multiplicity, fragmentation, and relativism. In literature, postmodernism introduced experimental narrative strategies such as metafiction, unreliable narration, pastiche, and intertextuality, all aimed at destabilizing notions of stable, coherent identity and objective reality (Hutcheon, 1988).

The intersection of feminist theory and postmodernism in this intellectual milieu created new avenues for rethinking identity and selfhood. Feminist identity politics—already attentive to the complex, multiple aspects of women's identities—found postmodern literature's fragmented, non-linear, and anti-essentialist approaches valuable for articulating the instability and multiplicity of gendered selves (Butler, 1990; Moi, 1999). This convergence marked a critical re-evaluation of the self, moving beyond fixed, unified conceptions toward fluid, contested, and constructed identities.

Postmodern Literature as a Site for Feminist Identity Politics

Postmodern literature serves as an influential site for feminist interventions into identity construction. Unlike traditional realist narratives, which often reinforce coherent, teleological character arcs and unified selves, postmodern literary texts emphasize the fractured, unstable nature of subjectivity. This literary instability resonates with feminist critiques of essentialism and universalism, enabling writers to experiment with new modes of self-representation that foreground difference, contradiction, and multiplicity.

The narrative techniques characteristic of postmodernism—such as fragmentation, unreliable narration, temporal dislocation, and intertextuality—allow feminist authors to depict selves as constructed through discourses, power relations, and social practices rather than innate essences. These strategies expose how gendered identities are shaped by cultural narratives and power structures, challenging patriarchal norms that seek to police and fix women's roles and identities.

Moreover, feminist postmodern literature frequently addresses the political dimensions of identity formation. By foregrounding language as a site of power and contestation, these texts emphasize how discursive practices regulate and discipline gendered selves. This aligns closely with Judith Butler's influential theory of gender performativity, which conceptualizes gender not as a stable trait but as a repeated social performance that constructs and reiterates identity through language and action (Butler, 1990).

Feminist Identity Politics: From Essentialism to Intersectionality

The feminist engagement with identity politics traces back to the 1970s, when marginalized groups within feminist and civil rights movements articulated the necessity of acknowledging the specific experiences of women based on race, class, sexuality, and other markers. This critique of early feminist universalism exposed the limitations of treating 'woman' as a singular, stable identity, instead advocating for a recognition of diverse, intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Feminist identity politics insists on self-definition as a political act, asserting that marginalized groups must reclaim their identities from dominant, often oppressive, narratives. This focus on identity as a site of both oppression and resistance highlights the tension between collective solidarity and individual difference, a tension that postmodernism's emphasis on multiplicity and fragmentation productively complicates.

By questioning the coherence and unity of identity, feminist identity politics also problematizes the idea that gender, or

any social category, can be understood as fixed or biologically determined. Rather, identities are socially constructed, historically contingent, and subject to change, making identity a contested and dynamic field (Hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991).

Postmodernism and the Decentered Self

Postmodernism's challenge to Enlightenment humanism includes a fundamental reconceptualization of the self. Contrary to modernist notions of a unified, autonomous subject, postmodern thought argues for a decentered, fragmented self shaped by language, culture, and power relations (Lyotard, 1984; Derrida, 1976). This conception destabilizes the idea of a coherent 'I' and invites reconsiderations of identity as fluid and multiple.

Literary postmodernism embodies this decentering through experimental narratives that disrupt chronology, character continuity, and authorial authority. By exposing the artificiality of narrative coherence, postmodern texts reveal the constructed nature of identity and subjectivity. For feminist writers, these techniques provide a critical toolset for interrogating the cultural construction of gender and for representing the complexity of women's lived experiences (Hutcheon, 1988; Moi, 1999).

Rewriting the Self in Feminist Postmodern Literature: A Survey of Key Concepts

Fragmentation and Multiplicity of Identity

Central to feminist postmodern writing is the portrayal of fragmented and multiple identities that resist monolithic conceptions of the self. This fragmentation reflects not only the complexity of social identities but also the internal contradictions and negotiations involved in identity formation.

For example, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) offers a semi-autobiographical narrative that explores the protagonist's struggles with her sexuality, religious upbringing, and social expectations. The novel's fragmented structure and shifting perspectives embody the instability of identity shaped by conflicting cultural narratives (Winterson, 1985). Such representations highlight how feminist postmodernism resists essentialist gender identities by emphasizing the plural, contradictory, and performative nature of selfhood.

Similarly, Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) employs disjointed, experimental narrative forms to undermine traditional gender binaries and fixed identities. Acker's fragmented prose and collage-like structure illustrate gender and sexuality as fluid, socially constructed performances rather than innate traits (Acker, 1984). This aligns with broader postmodern challenges to stable

subjectivities and reflects feminist commitments to disrupting patriarchal gender norms.

Language, Power, and Gender

Feminist postmodern literature places significant emphasis on the role of language in shaping gendered identities. Drawing on linguistic and poststructuralist theories, such as those advanced by Judith Butler, feminist theorists argue that gender is constituted through repeated linguistic and social acts, rather than being a natural or biological fact (Butler, 1990).

In literature, this insight is mirrored by narratives that foreground language's instability and its complicity in power relations. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) illustrates this dynamic vividly. The novel's dystopian regime exerts control not only over women's bodies but also over language, rewriting narratives of selfhood and agency. The protagonist's struggle to reclaim her voice becomes a metaphor for resisting linguistic and ideological domination (Atwood, 1985).

These literary explorations underscore how language both constructs and constrains identity, illuminating the political stakes involved in self-representation and feminist resistance.

Deconstruction of Patriarchal Narratives

Another significant strategy in feminist postmodern literature is the deconstruction of patriarchal myths and narratives that have historically defined and confined female subjectivities. By reinterpreting and subverting traditional stories, feminist writers challenge dominant gender ideologies and open space for alternative identities.

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), for example, reworks classic fairy tales to expose and undermine their patriarchal underpinnings. Through irony, intertextuality, and narrative inversion, Carter's stories destabilize male-centric narratives and foreground female agency and complexity (Carter, 1979).

This deconstruction aligns with postmodernism's broader critique of metanarratives, demonstrating how feminist literature can use postmodern strategies to rewrite the self and resist patriarchal cultural formations.

Theoretical Implications for Feminist Identity Politics

The engagement between feminist identity politics and postmodern literature has enriched feminist theory by complicating and expanding understandings of identity. Rejecting essentialism, feminist postmodern texts embrace intersectionality and multiplicity, emphasizing that gender is intertwined with other social markers such as race, class, and sexuality.

These texts advocate for a feminist praxis that values difference and fluidity, resisting the temptation to impose rigid identity categories. By rewriting the self as fragmented and contested, feminist postmodern literature challenges normative conceptions of identity and opens up new possibilities for empowerment and political resistance (Crenshaw, 1991; Butler, 1990).

CONCLUSION

In summary, feminist postmodern literature fundamentally rewrites the concept of the self by destabilizing fixed, essentialist identities and embracing fragmentation, multiplicity, and linguistic fluidity. Through narrative experimentation and deconstruction of patriarchal myths, these texts challenge dominant cultural discourses that have historically constrained female subjectivities, offering new modes of representing gender as socially constructed and performative. This literary reimagining aligns with and enriches feminist identity politics by promoting intersectionality and difference while resisting totalizing frameworks. Ultimately, the rewriting of the self in feminist postmodern literature not only contests traditional gender norms but also fosters more inclusive, dynamic, and politically empowering visions of identity, making it a vital site of feminist resistance and cultural transformation.

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