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Herstory is women's history: Are popular books by and about women pro-women?

Abstract:

This paper looks at 42 'family saga' novels written by and for women so as to interrogate issues raised in their content using the prism of feminist-postmodernist critical theories. It explores how such an approach calls for understanding that narrative is data and for accepting storytelling as applicable to academic frameworks as well as other forms of knowledge. This works towards understanding how this genre enables women's understanding of women's issues; brings historical aspects of women's lives into the contemporary domain so as to establish 'herstorical' practices and perspectives; and identifies the research-based elements of these novels so as to illuminate the backgrounds to the stories as providing further elements of 'fictional truth'.

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Introduction

Owing to second wave feminism, women became visible players in what became known as 'herstory' rather than the masculinist 'history'. Ellen Dubois notes how women's stories are inextricably linked to cultural activities related to gender. She is, however, hopeful that 'feminism is a method by which women's historical experiences are examined in terms of their efforts to challenge, struggle, make change and-yes-achieve progress in the options left to them.' (2005: 1) This paper proposes that family sagas play a significant role in such a vision.

Roland Barthes (1977) confronted the authority of the writer and disrupted the accepted mode of authorship to famously declare that the author as god was dead and that no text of any kind could come to life without the active interpretations of individual readers coming from particular times, places and cultural environs. From this we have the interesting paradox of the 'writerly-reader', the person who co-authors the text by bringing it to life through the act of reading.

Barthes challenges the power of the authoritative as a premature limit to interpretation rather than offering an open-ness of discourse. (1977). He proposes that the narrow interpretations of 'the author as god' become more fruitful when the reader displaces this certified reading and rises from the passive to the active. There are important implications in his assertion that 'The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture.' (1997: 142-3).

Jacques Derrida indicates that everything in a culture is a construction and can be most fruitfully understood when it is 'read against' or 'deconstructed' to show its constituent parts. His work is extremely influential in opening up challenges to societal and cultural 'givens' and 'norms'. In this context, the influence of Derrida can be seen in the problematisation of certainties and traditional academic discourses. (Derrida, 1978)

A feminist reading of the certainty of all texts suggests that there is value in the suspension of certainties and the acceptance of the text as a tissue or net in which interstices may lead to explorations that are as valuable as the threads. Helene Cixous, for example, challenges the authoritative text. She describes writing itself as '...the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of social and cultural structures.' (Cixous, 1991: 319-320). This accords with my reading of Gregory Ulmer's (1989) 'mystorical' approach opens up the text to many possible readings: there is no 'one way'. Thus even the act of writing, much less the lived experience of being, displays itself as non-authoritative in the conventional sense. Jane Gallop proposes a feminist anecdotal theory that calls for opening up textuality and discourse to critical ideas and analyses that seek to be ongoing rather than definitive. (Gallop 2002: 164.)

Methodology

As I am viewing these novels as cultural and sociological artefacts, it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss if they can be seen and accepted as literary works having, for example, strong plots, characterisation, dialogue, authorial voice, tone,

purpose, imagination and creativity. I do not, however, dispute these exist within this genre group, whilst I do dispute the 'high culture' versus 'low culture' literary positioning.

In developing a herstory about the family saga genre, I am confronting the academic practices and topics that are constrained by a view of knowledge dominated by the natural sciences. Mary Midgely calls this the '...progress myth and the myth of omniscient science.' She states quite categorically that '...science, which has its own magnificent work to do, does not need to rush in and take over extraneous kinds of questions (historical, logical, ethical, linguistic or the like) as well.' (2004: 6) I would add that narratives do their work as they should: magnificently, and should not be constrained by irrelevant methodologies arising from the natural sciences model.

In this paper I address my research question In what ways do family saga 'women's books' enable readers to relate to feminist-postmodernist critiques of cultural metanarratives? I utilise what I propose as 'subjective academic narrative' in this study which is a close, systematic and critical reading of the genre 'family saga novels'. In undertaking this study, I built upon a long period of reading many hundreds of family sagas. Though this habit, I began to see that their content, purpose, audience and involvement in 'women's business' was one of the reasons that they were denigrated as non literary, as 'pulp fiction' and even as some kind of debased 'chicklit'.

I have analysed 42 family saga novels¹ to bring forward a number of sociological questions relating to the relevance of popular fiction to real life. I identified these questions from my reading of these novels.

The critical framework

Feminist epistemology aims to reveal the concrete conditions producing abstract knowledge at the same time as it argues to include the personal and/as the theoretical. bell hooks says that '...merging critical thinking in everyday life with knowledge learned in books and through study has been the union of theory and practice that has informed my intellectual cultural work' (2006: 3)

It is this bringing together of the personal and the intellectual that underpins this study. hooks found this particularly so when she wanted to write in a way that brought together her academic and intellectual insights and also made them accessible to a non-academic audience. It was the growth of cultural studies that enabled her work to find an acceptable place. (2006: 3)

I bring to this reading of family saga novels my academic reading and thinking, beginning with Gregory Ulmer's idea of a 'mystory. The Canadian academic Gregory Ulmer (1989) identifies a 'mystorical' approach to thinking and research. A 'mystory' puts under erasure all claims to fact/authenticity in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It questions the dominant analytico-referential model of knowledge. At the same time it

accords with much late 20th and early 21st century thinking about the self, the culture and even the world as a text to be constructed and read.

Today, Ulmer applies this 'mystoriography' most readily within multimedia applications as a process of self-invention and re-invention as one maps 'one's location in a discourse network'. (2005) This Ulmeric approach will be enriched by seeing this study, and the manner in which this paper is written, through the prism of what Jane Gallop (2002) has termed 'anecdotal theory'. This is an attempt to have a theoretical perspective that engages and enriches in an 'exorbitant' manner, and not to have a theoretical perspective that leads to barriers of academic language, intent and research boundaries related more to the Natural Sciences than to life stories. '...our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play of language, since dynamic rather than fixed forms seem more to our liking.' (Gallop 2002: 1)

For Jacques Derrida, the purpose of the 'exorbitant' in academic theorizing is revealed by the word's own etymology. It comes from the latin 'ex' meaning 'out of or from' and the 'orba' meaning the 'usual route'. Hence the 'exorbitant' is not boundaried and held in submission by the usual. It is something that pushes the boundaries of the known to enable extension. (in Gallop 2002: 9)

Derrida (1974) indicates that reading leaves the orbit of the text to the reader: it is not confined by the author's thinking. In discussing 'The Law of Genre' (1980), he disrupts authority further: as soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind...' (56-57). Derrida's work has led not only to a consideration of the construction of culture, but also to the possibilities involved in deconstructing cultural norms so as to identify their essential constructedness and deny their truth claims. The impact this has had upon literary genres is to question them, especially those genres which have been deemed 'canonical'. As a result for many involved in the critical debate between the canonical and the non-canonical, such as John Guillory, '...the formation of the literary canon has emerged as an area of struggle over questions of a more systemic nature than the rise and fall of individual reputations. ' (1987: 485)

Gallop proposes that 'anecdotal theory' is a feminist activity that enables non-patriarchal ways of thinking and doing academic work. It aims to 'tie theorizing to lived experience...anecdotal theory must be...the juncture where theory finds itself compelled -against its will, against its projects- to think where it has been forced to think.' (Gallop 2002: 15)

Indeed, Gallop forces us to consider theory itself as an act of power that disempowers others. hooks agrees: 'I am constantly amazed at how difficult it is to cross borders in this white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society.' (2006: 6) It is not, she avers, an act of will but social privilege that enables such border crossing; it relies upon material, educational and cultural advantage that privileges individuals. Her aim is to establish how borders can be crossed by others (the 'non-us' of 'them and us'?) who enact multicultural and colonized backgrounds of repression so that there is freedom of movement available to all who desire to enact it.

Midgely sees part at least of the problem as inappropriately applying Enlightenment ways or 'imperialistic ideologies' of validating knowledge to aspects of being, thinking and knowing that are other aspects of knowledge and ways of knowing altogether. (2004: 21)

Background to the Study

Writing by and for women in this broad genre of the family saga is amongst the best-selling writing in the dominant Western commercial publishing business. At the same time, it is seen as unliterary and even unworthy by the literati who include academics, teachers, reviewers, scholars, critics, literateurs and some academic feminists who see it as a gendered 'dumbing-down'. 'Literature' is worthwhile and challenging in its scope; it is serious and enriching in its content; it is deepening and even ennobling in its intent. 'Women's novels' are popular fiction that deserve to be pulped rather than read, struggled with, read against, enjoyed.

In any taxonomy of literary values, such 'popular fiction' is seen as not belonging within a canon of 'serious writing'. It is 'superficial' rather than 'deep'. It is not seen as moving the reader towards the light of insights and knowledge. It cannot be called art, or even craft. Instead it is seen as debilitating and anti-intellectual 'entertainment'. Such taxonomies ascribing values to writing are the basis of genre: they implicate writing in a cultural awareness that involves value-judgements: they are far from innocent.

'Genres evolve through human purposes, reflecting and reproducing (through the various systems in which they are implicated) what is culturally relevant and significant for the human community.' (Swingewood, 1986: 104) The genre of 'writing for women' is a sneer-genre. It presupposes a kind of intellectually denying emotionalism. In doing so it works fruitfully on the Cartesian binary as well as the gender divide. It flourishes within a cultural metanarrative that ascribes particular values to writing as to other cultural activities. This 'sneer-genre' divides popular culture from more meaningful cultural activities.

Yet since the post World War Two development of postmodernist theories about textuality and discourse that acted to reveal the constructed nature of culture, there has been an increasing interest in the importance of popular cultural activities. The orderly taxonomy of literary genres has been challenged, and divisions between 'serious' and 'popular' writing have been stretched and even demolished.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis says: '...feminist critique is not simply about gender: it is also a challenge to the split between thought and feeling; ...the feminism of critique is based on inquiry, resistance, disobedience, rage and on placing yourself as if in utopian new time.' (2005: 5)

Underpinning this authoritative nature of prose is the taxonomy of genre: scientific, romantic, fact, fiction, intellectual, junk-science, women's magazines and so on. Some genres are serious and important, others are less so, and others are negligible. There is critical debate about the position of canonical and non-canonical literary texts.

Guillory sees the canon as signifying: '...the process of inclusion or exclusion by which social groups are represented or not represented in the exercise of power.' stating, furthermore, that it has far-reaching pedagogical as well as critical results and influence. (2007: 489)

It is demonstrative that the Western dominant culture and hegemony has as its strong basis the desire to categorise and to order. In writing, genre is clearly a part of this urge: important genre is scientific writing. It is full of factual data. It claims to be disinterested as though its practices come from outside the culture itself and are fully inclusive... that is, no choices are made about what should be researched and why and who should be the subjects and who should provide the money. 'Pure' science is probably at the top of the genre list, women's magazines are towards the bottom. This is instructional, because the latter are full of advice about how to dress, eat, run relationships, bring up children, or make things. Clearly such everyday activities are low on the scale of importance. 'The institutionalized invisibility of women has provided the context for prior unqueried gender bias in research.' (Tomm and Hamilton, 1988: xv-xvi)

The Data

These 42 novels were selected for this project because they:

- are able to be purchased at newsagents. This means that they are readily available to people who may or may not feel adequate about, and/or interested in, entering bookshops
- can be seen as something other than 'high' literature...perhaps entertainment or enjoyment?
- do not compete with large numbers of other books and hence are readily able to be selected
- can be brought on the spur of the moment
- relate to other material (such as magazines) that are available in newsagents
- are at a special price, particularly for groups of three
- have colourful and descriptive covers
- have a description on the 'blurb' that is pithy
- are written by women
- have titles that explain their content and also appeal to women
- are similar in theme being broadly in the 'family saga' category
- have a girl-to-woman theme
- are published specifically for a women's audience
- are clearly not soft porn or 'romance' novels

The 'serious' yet 'popular' and 'literary' novelist Jeanette Winterson says of fiction that it '...can concentrate people's minds in a way which is not about the news, or is not about TV, or about articles in *Nature* or special programs on the radio. Once you make it into a fable or an allegory or imaginative space, people are prepared to enter it differently and they'll go with you on the particular journey.' (2007: 30)

These family sagas make up fables and/or an allegories of 'real life' that bring forward for consideration within an anecdotal framework issues that concern women. In doing so, they open up an 'imaginative space' that permits their consideration in a non-threatening way within stories that relate to women's lived experiences and/or yearnings.

The main protagonist is inevitably a young woman who is in straitened circumstances); is gifted by persistence; and can see beyond the everyday. In many ways these 'heroines' act in practice to highlight how cultural barriers and metanarratives can be subjected to scrutiny and rejected. It can be seen through the anecdotes within these novels and the characterisation of the female protagonist that this female is a model for feminism. She is aware of the restrictions of the patriarchy from the everyday of her father and brothers to the power of the mill or factory owner, the rich man in the big house or the councillor, doctor or even male voter. She does not accept this situation lightly or easily. She is unable to buckle down to the cultural expectations of the woman as lesser than the man. Whatever vicissitudes that come about through both the patriarchy itself and her inability to accept it, she remains firm in her beliefs in herself as a woman who can become empowered within a culture that seeks to disempower her because of her gender as well as her class. (Feher 1990: 174)

Although these novels are usually set in another century, they portray women as captured by the class structures of a culture that also ensures the domination of men over women. In bringing to life this gender differentiation, they enable women readers to reflect upon their own positions indirectly. This 'fictional truth' enables questions to be raised and asked within an unthreatening environment. In doing so it permits women to consider their own experiences. It is in keeping with Gallop's 'anecdotal theory' in that '...a whole lot of theory turns out to be "anecdotal": that is, the thinking is inspired, energized, or made necessary by some puzzling, troubling, instigating life event.' (Gallop 2002:16)

Women's relationship to their own sexuality is a very vexed area of gender equality that is subject to the patriarchal structures that feminists see as intolerable. Catherine McKinnon says: 'I think that sexual desire in women at least in this culture, is socially constructed as that by which we come to want our own self-annihilation That our subordination is eroticized in and as female.... This is our stake in the system that is not in our interest, our stake in a system that is killing us. I'm saying that femininity as we know it is how we come to want male dominance, which most emphatically is not in our interest.' (in de Laurentis 1990: 125) Such academic-speak is not readily accessible to most women, yet it is echoed in most of these books where marriage is a kind of necessary self-abnegation.

The construction of women's reality is historically and contemporaneously one of oppression. Historically, it may be overt as in the 'first wave' where often privileged white western women sought the equivalence of voting and the 'second wave' where often privileged white western women sought to leave 'the women's room'. In the early 21st century, it is more covert as often privileged white western women claim a generational difference that enables a new understanding of what it is to be woman. 'Third wave' feminism argues that the advantages gained by the first and second wave have so altered the cultural construction that the rigid ideals and practices of earlier feminisms are no longer relevant. Hence, post-feminism results even as the times call for a feminism that must '...be multiple, be various, be polyphonous...' (Gillis et al 2007)

One of the interesting aspects of these novels is that although issues are addressed that are not in themselves new, they are saved from being repetitive, expected and stereotypical by unexpected and even surprise angles taken by the writer. Also, each novel addresses many cultural and social issues embedded within the struggle of the main protagonist through whom the story comes to life for/with the reader. This means that there is no single core issue in any of the novels even though they all fit into the broad category of 'women's writing' and the broad genre of 'family saga'.

As the following table indicates, various social problems are revealed and considered from a female perspective through what I would consider 'anecdotes'. They may come about through dialogue, or may be woven into the story as reflections by the first-person female main protagonist as in this revelation of her reaction to entering a German concentration death-camp after World War 2 ended in Europe: '...they were in an extermination camp, ...it was estimated that the place contained some forty to fifty thousand prisoners within its square-mile area, a large proportion dead but unburied, and the remainder suffering from a variety of contagious diseases aggravated by acute malnutrition...Although it was broad daylight, the interior of the place was so dark that they could only see by torchlight, and its beam illuminated the racks of corpse-like figures, some motionless and some still moving feebly. The smell was like a physical blow in the face...' (Gardiner 1988: 221-2)

Elements of the novels include:

Set in England	42
Titles are evocative of emotional engagement	16
Female authors' names	42
Female main protagonist	41
Education presented as transformative	27
Commercial success shown to enable transcending poverty	18
Covers have painted portrait of female protagonist	41
Middle/upper class lost	12
Middle/upper class gained	24
Remain within working class structure	12
Live in slums	24
Alcoholism blights father	5
Domestic violence perpetrated by repressive bullying father	15

Repressive female bullies main female protagonist	18
Responsibilities for siblings at a very young age due to poverty	12
Late 19 th century	6
Early 20 th century	12
Late 20 th century	20
World War 1	12
World War 2	15
The Great Depression	12
In love with unloving/unwarm man	11
Step families that are unsympathetic	7
Repression of female gender generally	30
Union rights	5
Votes for women	6
Psychological depression	9
Madness	9
Illness	40
Marriage as promise of a better life	15
Marriage as a trap	12
Parental responsibilities	13
Rights for women, particularly married women, to work outside the home	4
Domestic drudgery to the point of slavery	15
Parenting pressures as a single mother	19
Paedophilia/incest	18
Unfair work practices	21
Unfair salaries	15
Religion and its influences	15
Political situations for the poor and unrepresented	5
Inequality before the law	21
The vote for females	5
The heroine speaks standard English more easily than local slum dialect and moves beyond her class	17
Deals with loss to suicide	7
Deals with the loss of a child	23
Factual research is evident	25

What's missing?

Although almost all of these novels referred to the urban environmental degradation from the perspective of the poor slum dwellers, broader environmental issues were largely ignored.

It is difficult if not impossible to see these family sagas as being concerned in any way with multiculturalism, much less racial tolerance or post-colonial issues of multi-racialism. Set in England, they are Anglo-Saxon to the core. It is the Irish who are subject to racial slurs and are denigrated: other races simply do not seem to exist in the England that forms the background for these family sagas. The core issues revolve

around the tyranny of class. In the 21st century it's old-fashioned and blinkered not to link this to race, particularly in an England that is increasingly other than Anglo-Saxon. As we have seen, these family sagas are set in an old-fashioned England. Their structures and anecdotes are related to that. The question arises: should they be read for what is there or for what is not there? It is a tenet of postmodernist-feminism that gaps and elisions are as telling as what is identifiably present. However, for an audience that may be assumed to lack educated critical consciousness, these gaps and elisions contribute to 'norms' rather than reveal them as empty gestures subject to critical reflection and evaluation. This contrasts sharply with other 'norms' that I have shown to be challenged in these novels.

'Since the disruption of the colonized/colonizer mind-set is necessary for border crossings to not simply reinscribe old patterns, we need strategies for decolonization that aim to change the minds and habits of everyone engaged in cultural criticism.' (hooks 2006:6)

As I claim that these novels are engaged in cultural criticism, I cannot defend their inability to see, much less mention, much less emphasise, racial colonization and neo-colonization. This study supports bell hooks's claim that 'politically, we do not live in a postcolonial world, because the mind-set of neo-colonialism shapes the underlying metaphysics of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.' (2006:7)

Indeed, it was in a consideration of racism that the now common but still contentious term of 'third wave feminism' was first recorded in the 1980's as '...a conceptualisation of the third wave centred around the challenges by women-of-colour feminists to the racial biases of second wave feminism...however, the feminist consciousness and activity promised by these formulations has given way to an emphasis on generational distinction and distinctiveness.' (Gillis et al 2007 xxiii-iv) Stacey Gillis et al note that the third wave feminists '...prefer contradiction, multiplicity and difference' (2007:xxiv) I see this as a strongly postmodernist-feminist position.

'Third wave' feminism has come to identify itself as 'post-feminist'. This is proffered as being a movement beyond postmodernist-feminism. Again, it is not within the scope of this paper to enter this debate. I would note, however, that the feminist question of the position of women-of-colour, remains unresolved in many arenas and 'waves', not only as being unuttered in these family saga books under study in this paper. (Dux & Simic 2008)

Another large gap in these 'herstories' is that of lesbianism and homosexuality as a part of the culture that could be recorded alongside other cultural and sociological issues in these novels. Instead, they contribute to the silencing of lesbian and homosexual narratives and anecdotes within our culture. Teresa de Laurentis discusses this as a cultural blindspot:

'The very fact that, in most theoretical and epistemological frameworks, gender and social division is either not visible, in the manner of a blind spot, or taken for granted, in the manner of a priori, reflects a heterosexual presumption-that the sociosexual opposition of "woman" and "man" is the necessary and founding moment of culture...'. (1990:130)

Conclusions of the study

The novels reflect the age, backgrounds, and experiences of the target group of readers, yet the novels are not merely formulaic. They are stories by, for and about women that address the issues that have historically confronted English women in the late 19th and 20th centuries. This broad range of sociological and personal issues still exists in many women's lives today. '... 'feminism' is not the name of some new doctrine, imported into controversies for no good reason. The name stands for the steady systematic correction of an ancient and very damaging bias...feminism might hope in the end to become unnecessary and so to put itself out of business. But that end is still a long way off.' (Midgely 2004:93)

Moreover, these novels provide a background to the lives of ordinary women: they are a herstory told through narratives to which the readers relate. In this way, they provide a space in which readers can identify 'fictional truths' within a narrative that enables them to both stand aside and to engage. It is not within the scope of this paper to evaluate their literary merits, but as social documents these novels are a very rich resource for women's stories, enabling us both to identify and to explore issues that are relevant to all women's lives. Winterson says of her story-telling in her novels: 'I was brought up in a gospel tent and I want to change the world.' (2007:31)

Postfeminism has not answered these feminist needs, and the end is still a long way off for 'herstory' to be acknowledged as a significant partner to 'history.' (Tasker and Negra 2005)

Endnotes

1. The novels under study are:

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