

A Structural Shift in the Stereotyped Gender Role: Revisiting Hemingway's Approach towards Love, Sex and Women

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Abstract: One of the most acclaimed American writers of the 20th century, Ernest Hemingway is well known for his portrayal of masculinity known as Hemingway's Code of 'grace under pressure'. Hemingway's fiction delineates the trauma men encounter dealing with women in the post-war American society. However, this study puts forward the view that Hemingway provided a distinct voice to the post-Victorian woman in his literature. The paper is based on the argument that Hemingway's treatment of female characters and his approach towards love, sex and women needs to be revisited. By taking into account the three major war novels of Hemingway, namely, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, this research aims to explore the gender role reversal and its impact on the post-war American society.

Key Terms: masculinity, code, gender, post-Victorian, sexuality, role reversal, lost generation

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent voices in the American Literature, Ernest Hemingway, known as 'the poster boy for archaic masculinity' (Haske, 2017), has been widely criticized for his portrayal of masculinity known as Hemingway Code of 'grace under pressure'. Hemingway's harrowing experiences in the war enabled him to depict the dilemma, stoicism and disillusionment of his times (Azhar, 2010). In the post-war era, the chivalric notions of warfare were destroyed, and the traditional image of masculinity got a severe blow. War conflicts led to the unprecedented structural changes in the American society. In most of Hemingway's novels and short stories female characters do not appear to be as strong and powerful as the male characters, yet they are instantly recognizable, and they resolutely march ahead with a definite goal in their mind.

War and its Impact on the Society

In the aftermath of the First World War, there arose a group of young people in America known as "The Lost Generation" (writersinspire.org/content/lost-generation). These people were disillusioned by the large number of casualties, and had a cynical, disdainful attitude against the Victorian notions of morality and propriety of their elders (blocs.mesvilaweb.cat/subirats/). Women discarded their long hair and traditional dresses, and started wearing revealing dresses. The strict gender roles set by the Victorian society did not last anymore as women came out of their houses and grabbed jobs exclusively meant for men. In the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape, men and women of the "Lost Generation" were forced to reverse their stereotyped gender roles. The role reversal in the post-war man-woman relationship was a clear shift in deconstructing the gender stereotype. Ernest Hemingway's involvement in World War and the Spanish Civil War allowed him to capture accurately a structural shift in the stereotyped gender roles causing various kinds of conflict. Hemingway's portrayal of the relationships of Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, Frederick Henry and Catherine Berkley in *A Farewell to Arms* and Robert Jordan and Maria in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* reveals how war anxiety of the early twentieth century served as a catalyst for reversing the rigid gender roles of the previous century (Zabala, 2007).

Jake Barnes

Like millions of young males of that time, Jake Barnes, in the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, went into the World War, and came back disillusioned with a severe blow to his manhood. Jack's impotency caused him to explore new outlets for his masculinity as the Victorian masculine ideals no longer applied to him. Jake knew that he could not impregnate a woman, and hence, could not assert his sexual dominance. Ira Elliot remarks: "Jake Barnes's male identity is called into question by the genital wound he suffered during the First World War" (Elliot, 1995). With his war wound and his emotional awakening, Jake embodies the characteristics of the people of the Lost Generation. Jake's physical malady has profound psychological consequences. His insecurity about his masculinity is typical of the anxieties people of the Lost Generation felt. As the new man of the post-war era, Jake accommodates the characteristics of new women, and does not stand in the way of their

progress. By adapting the language and behaviour once thought to be limited to the female gender, men like Jake Barnes, gained a newfound respect for women who ventured out of their homes and created a new identity for themselves (Zabala, 2007).

Brett Ashley

Brett Ashley, a beautiful 'British socialite', in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, is the embodiment of a Lost Generation woman. As the novel begins, Brett is separated from her husband and awaiting a divorce. Though she loves Jake, she is unwilling to commit to a relationship with him as it will mean giving up sex (<https://www.mercerisland schools .org/cms/>). Reflecting changing behaviours, she wears pants and has her hair cropped, and is sexually uninhibited (Jones, 2019). Displaying sexual confidence in her relationships, Brett rejected traditional values which considered a woman who stepped outside her home as a woman of stained reputation (Zabala, 2007). The repressive Victorian ideals of the nineteenth century forced women to repress their sexuality by making it a taboo, and forced them to view sex as a 'wifely duty' to gratify their husbands. However, women of the "Lost Generation", with their husbands away from home during the war period, viewed it as an optimal time to engage in various sexual experiences (Zabala, 2007). In the new structure of man-woman relationship, Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley accepted themselves as partners. Brett Ashley attempts to find her place in the wake of a war and a gender revolution, surrounded by changing ideas, gender roles, and cultural standards (Jones, 2019).

Frederick Henry

In Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Lt Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver fighting for the Italian army, loses his perspective for joining the war. He becomes sceptical about his importance in the war. It seems he has joined the army simply to achieve an affirmation of his masculinity, which, by the turn of the century, was under an inevitable threat (Atanu, 2018). Being an American, in the Italian army, Henry is repeatedly asked for his purpose to join the war. A desire to achieve heroism through a reaffirmed masculinity appears to be the only reason that had made him join the war. However, he is disillusioned soon, and came to realize the futility of war. Henry, quickly loses what little sense of duty he previously held: "It evidently made no difference whether I was there to look after things or not.... the whole thing seemed to run better while I was away" (*A Farewell to Arms*, 16-17). Like the people of the Lost Generation, Henry's realization about his insignificance made him vulnerable.

Henry's relationship with Catherine also appears to be a desperate attempt to find a replacement for his vulnerability. Henry tries to embody the expression of sexual desire and the control of a woman's body to compensate the masculinity he has been unable to achieve in war" (Hatten, 2014). Henry, successfully, escapes the patriarchal expectations set for him by fleeing to Switzerland with Catherine. Switzerland, as Marc Hewson asserts, "provides the lovers, an area outside the masculine laws of war, and by extension, outside the laws governing gender identity" (Hewson, 2003).

Catherine Berkley

Catherine Barkley, a tall, British nurse in the military hospital at Milan, can very easily be categorized as a "love slave" that Hemingway has supposedly created in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (Sanderson, 1996). She displays a strong sexual passion as well as a very powerful individualistic demeanour in the novel. Catherine's mention of the war symbolizes the fact that it is the war that has changed her perception about love and sex, as she observes the impact of her fiancé's death: "I thought perhaps he couldn't stand it and then of course he was killed and that was the end of it" (*A Farewell to Arms*, 19). Hatten (2014) remarks, Catherine offers Henry the detachment from the illusions of the war to which he clings. She suggests Henry to 'simply leave' the war, and indeed, motivates Henry to desert the war, and to withdraw into a private world of sexual desire and fulfilment (Atanu, 2018).

A model of courage and stoic self-awareness, Catherine is determined to forge a meaningful and orderly existence, if only temporarily, in a world, in which all traditional notions of meaning and order has been shattered (Donaldson, 1996). Catherine becomes the overpowering modern woman, unabashedly exploring her sexual pleasures while non-conforming to the Victorian values of family, subjugation and chastity. By rejecting Henry's proposal for marriage, and by initiating the sexual relations unconventionally, Catherine makes it clear that she is not willing to let the proverbial patriarch dictate his terms. By her move, she confirms that she is not a passive receiver in the act, rather she is a dominant player (Atanu, 2018).

Robert Jordan

Similar to Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* also embodies the characteristics of the men of the 'Lost Generation.' Though Robert Jordan's story takes place during the period of Spanish Civil War, he displays his disillusionment with war and humanity that men displayed after the World War (Zabala, 2007). In fact, Jordan's Lost Generation mindset redefines the masculine hero by

embracing submissive qualities usually attributed to women. Though, gender reversals did not come without internal conflict to Robert Jordan, he supports role reversal, and allows himself to view Maria as his equal from whom he could learn many lessons of life(coursehero.com/file/p7tv2eo/Robert-does-not-think-to-ask-Maria-to-grow-her-hair-long).The beliefs and practices of the previous generation did not apply to Robert Jordan, who realized that being masculine does not mean having control over every situation rather, being masculine means being sensitive to the problems and challenges of women folk. Jordan appreciates Maria and realizes that the more their gender boundaries blur, the happier and healthier, their relationship becomes (Zabala, 2007).

Maria

Maria is a young Spanish woman in a war torn country, who was brutally raped by the fascist soldiers. Though 'ravaged and traumatized', Maria doesn't behave like a rape victim, rather her behaviour is like that of a survivor (britannica.com/topic/For-Whom-the-Bell-Tolls-). Maria endured not only the killing of her parents, but also survived the brutal rape by the multiple soldiers. Maria's experiment with her sexuality reflects her will to heal from the traumatic experiences of the past. She experiences physical pain in sexual activity, yet she perseveres and endures. With her sheer will power, she is able to retain her sexuality, something the rapists had tried to snatch from her. In the beginning of her relationship with Robert, 'hesitant and scared', Maria initiates the encounter by getting into Robert's sleeping bag. Though, this is her first sexual experience ever since her rape, Maria guides Robert's movements by declaring, "I love thee. Oh, I love thee"(Zabala, 2007).

Maria refuses to be a helpless and defenceless victim. Just as Jake in the novel *The Sun Also Rises* does not let his war wound ruin his masculinity, Maria does not let her brutal experience ruin her sexuality. In spite of being a rape survivor, her desire to gain control stems from the gender role reversal experienced by the people of Lost Generation, who didn't subscribe the Victorian notion that women were meek and helpless and needed the support of men. Maria's short hair symbolizes her free spirit, and her willingness to live her life, not as a victim but as a survivor. It is through Jordan's love Maria is able to realize that she is worthy and capable of receiving love. She also appears to make significant progress in self-development. She learns to shoot a gun, and later experiences militant action first-hand. By the end of the novel, she is not entirely a victim(Derek, 2007).

II. CONCLUSION

Ernest Hemingway, meticulously, depicted war anxiety and frustration in the relationship between men and women, and enabled them to fit into their new roles. The shattering experiences of war brought unprecedented changes in the structure of the contemporary American society. "As the war initiated and accelerated a period of sudden, often, traumatic change, former structural relations between men and women became increasingly blurred..."(Bonds 2009). According to Ross, Hemingway's male characters, often, seek freedom from the fear that a "failure" to perform, as expected, will not signify that they are less than men (Ross, 2011).

Men of that age, like Jake Barnes, Fredrich Henry and Robert Jordan did not view role reversals as a threat to their masculinity, rather they took it as a way to redefine their masculinity. However, Hemingway's female characters are also forced to adapt to an evolving gender-role structure. Though, considered to be a misogynist, Hemingway has given space to woman's individualism and her right to a woman's body (Atanu, 2018). Hemingway's war novels : *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Toll* trace the significant rise of women of his time(<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>). Brett Ashley, Catherine Berkley and Maria are all powerful female characters, who challenged the traditional gender role of the Victorian times, and carved a place in the stereotyped masculine world.

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