

## **A transformation in the feministic poetry of the past and the present: A comparative study of the poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire- *The Rights of Women and For Women Who Are Difficult to Love***

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the remarkable metamorphosis in the representation of feminism in the poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire. The present paper is a detail study discussing the differences and the common central features present in the poems, *The Rights of women* written during the earlier Romantic and French revolution period and *For Women who are difficult to love* written during the contemporary period. This is an effort to discuss in detail the ideas and thoughts of the feministic poets during the earlier and the present period through the works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire. Furthermore, this paper is an attempt to reveal how the traditions and societal norms have created an impact in the writings of women. Both the poems mark the words of inspiration given by the poets to the oppressed women of society during their period of writing. The modern world representation of writing has drastically changed in the way of imaginations, realities and concepts that the writers held in the age old period of ancestors. This paper is mainly concerned with the difference present in feministic approaches of writing during the past and the present period of literary writings written by women.

**Keywords:** feminism, patriarchal society, transformation, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Warsan Shire.

### **Introduction**

“Feminism is a way of looking at the world, which women occupy from the perspective of women. It has as its central focus the concept of patriarchy, which can be described as a system of male authority, which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions.” (Osborne, S. 2001)

Even though the term feminism was introduced into the fields of literature during the late nineteenth century, several contributions were made by the women writers even into the earliest written works of literature. Many women writers of classical period have intoned rays of hope to the oppressed sections of the society. Though the centuries have changed and

a new genre called feminist literature arose, women still strive to come out of the pre-societal norms set by the patriarchal world represented by men folks and thus to attain empowerment and liberty. Considering the poems, *The Rights of Women* and *For Women Who Are Difficult to Love*, even though both the writers have represented their own society through these poems and have focused on the thoughts of patriarchy set by the male chauvinistic sections, there is a huge difference in their ideas of representation of thoughts. This paper identifies and discusses the difference in the approaches and thereby throws light of how differently the marginalized sections of society are motivated by these writers in the past and the contemporary world.

“The 19th century saw an increasingly widespread and articulate statement of women’s claims – perhaps in reaction to the emergence of an image of true ‘femininity’ that seemed to become more constricted as the century wore on: a class-based ideal of gentility and refinement.”

(Margaret Walters, 2005).

The social and economic situations prevalent during the classical period, marginalized the women of that century more by grabbing their basic liberal rights and enforcing a life of slavery in the male-controlled society. Women were degraded and oppressed; the role of women in the society was restricted towards the four corners of the house being a homemaker. Though there were some women who stood for the rights of the oppressed, the acceptance of the feminist writings were not worth mentioning during the classical periods of writing. In the contemporary world, there was a massive change in the contributions and acceptance of literature works. This in turn, resulted in a substantial increase in the acceptance of women’s privileges and the genre of feminist writings took a new turn in the fields of writing. In the poems, *The Rights of Women* and *For Women Who Are Difficult to Love*, these poets show how differently they represent the same theme of the need for gender equality by providing an inspiration to the women of their society through their works.

Considering the writers of the romantic canon, the important insights into which the majority of writers focused was nature, religion, romance and imagination. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, even though she belonged to the Romantic period of literature, she as a writer was greatly concerned with the privileges of women in her society and stood to improve the social, political and economic conditions of women by providing greater insights into her literary works focusing on the same. The poet motivates the women of her society to rise up amidst the odds and not to be confined to the four corners of the house. On the other hand, the British writer Warsan Shire addresses the women of her society by asking them to accept their uniqueness.

“While Barbauld produced works in many genres, her total production as a poet was slight; the bulk of her poetry remained unpublished until after her death.”(SUSAN ROSENBAUM, 2001) Researchers have recognized the works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire as major works supporting the oppressed and marginalized sections of the society. Yet, researchers point out that even though Anna Laetitia Barbauld have contributed

significantly in the field of literature during the Romantic period, the works of poetry that she penned was not published until her death. This clearly indicates the differentiation faced by a woman writer during the early romantic period in the male chauvinistic society.

Warsan Shire who is a contemporary poet, often described into the genre of web poets in the digital era, too stands for the women of her society. The contemporary writing style in her poems urges the women to be active and not to remain passive in the society. Poet tries to produce thrusts in her women readers by showcasing women as unique away from the stereotypical expectations.

This paper relates Anna Laetitia Barbauld's poem *The Rights of Women* and Warsan Shire's poem *For Women Who Are Difficult to Love* to identify the differences in the ways of representing feminism in the past and the contemporary period. Works of feminism and literature articles and artifacts on feminism and feminist writers are abundantly available and the field of feminism has been given a wide scope especially in the current world but a differentiation in the style of approach in the representation of women, found in the writings of poets in the contemporary period and in the romantic period is an extensive area of research. It helps to attain a deeper insight towards the culture of the society during that time, the thoughts and desires of women during a particular time period and also aids to understand the level of transformation that has taken place in the literature especially in the genre of women's writings.

## Discussion

Barbauld's life work in some ways ends in frustration, as she saw little progress in her struggle for justice. Even without the satisfaction of witnessing the fruit of her labor, she continued to promote women's minds through her writing, and she befriended and supported many intelligent young women. (Carlile, S.nd)

By virtue of both her gender and faith, she was doubly barred from citizenship. No wonder, then, that her early published work fought unfairness wherever it was found. (Guardian, 2009)

Belonging to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century poets, Anna Laetitia Barbauld was a great poet whose works are often neglected by the 20<sup>th</sup> century critics. The exploration of freedom was a common subject matter that was often visible in most of her works. Going through the work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) written by Mary Wollstonecraft made Anna Laetitia Barbauld to respond to it on the need for the liberation of women against the injustices and restrictions they faced in their life. This response led to the creation of her work *The Rights of Women*.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld always challenged gender stereotypes through her poems by taking masculine artistic forms and inhabiting them with female experience. Even though she

raised her voice for the justice and liberty of women through her works, slightest of her works witnessed any acceptance in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anna Laetitia Barbauld was born into a society where women were not accepted or given freedom to attain their dreams and pleasures and was solely regarded as a commodity. On the latter half, after her death all her poems were accepted by the world and she was represented as the woman of letters. All her works showcased the fact that it was possible for women to rise up along with men in the society. During her writing career, even though she was little known for her works written for the justice of women due to the lack of acceptance by the society, she was a famous writer known for her contributions in the world of children's literature. The works that the poet wrote for the rights of women faced unfairness during the period of her writing career and was accepted only after she was deceased.

“The 20th century had brought about a number of radical changes in the perception of women in society. By the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, women found themselves in a much more equal position to men than they had in previous decades.” (Gemberling, K. 2004)

On the contrary, Warsan Shire the British writer and poet of the contemporary era is a widely accepted poet by the present world for her notable contributions and the support she provides to women through her works. As a Kenyan born Somali- British writer she supported her marginalized black women society through her written works by representing the womanhood in general. One of the major differences seen in the past and present feminism is based on the outcome of acceptance of women writers and their thoughts by the society during their time period of writing.

Researchers point out that the contemporary period of women writings on feminism was widely accepted by the society, when compared to the past due to the radical change in the understanding of women in the society. Considering Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire, we can say Warsan Shire is widely accepted by the literary world and the society for her works for women than Anna Laetitia Barbauld as by this century, women have found more equal position to men when compared to the past decades.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld's poem, *The Rights of Woman* inspires the women to rise up and challenge the men. The poem is more based on political issues and focuses and fights against the imperial rule of men in the society. The poem mainly focuses on the oppressed women of the society to rise up from their injuries and to assert their rules in the society. Anna Laetitia Barbauld motivates her readers never to give up and ask the women to resume their lost space in the patriarchal society. “Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign, And kiss the golden sceptre of thy reign. (Barbauld, 7-8)

Anna Laetitia Barbauld, against the likelihood of the society, though not accepted has used strong words of power in her poem. The poet in her poem tells the women of her society to be strong and convey the fact to men that their rule is over and it's time for the men to accept women and her power. The poet in her poem has beautifully composed deep and wider thoughts in her poem using few words.

A significant fact to be noted in the poem written by Anna Laetitia Barbauld is that, the poet throughout the poem is trying to provide inspiration to the women to be strong and regain their power in the male dominated society and never to lose their hope in the struggles that they will undergo during this process. The poet conveys a note of optimism to her women readers by stating that they are not the weaker sections of the society.

As we get ahead of the past centuries, we can also notice how the ideologies and thoughts take a makeover in the written works of literature. Warsan Shire's poem, *For Women Who Are Difficult to Love* do not ask the women to take over the power and empire from men rather the poet reminds women that they are unique and to cherish what they are, than confirming to socially acceptable forms of femininity to please men.

While Anna Laetitia Barbauld is focusing on the societal freedom for the women of her society in general, we can say in the present, Warsan Shire in her poem has focused on a woman's personal freedom and provides strength to her readers to appreciate their talents and uniqueness in the society by not going against the traditional notions and expectations of women set by men in the society.

Warsan Shire in her poem, *For Women Who Are Difficult to Love* show how women get weaker emotionally when it comes to the aspect of love and how they compromise themselves for the sake of love. "you are a horse running alone and he tries to tame you, compares you to an impossible highway, to a burning house, says you are blinding him, that he could never leave you." (Warsan Shire, 1-6)

Warsan Shire in her poem not only talks for the women rather the poet also portray how men in the world initially try to tame women according to their ideologies by stating falsifying words and how they finally destroy the uniqueness prevalent in women.

" you can't make homes out of human beings, someone should have already told you that, and if he wants to leave, then let him leave, you are terrifying and strange and beautiful, something not everyone knows how to love." (Warsan Shire, 29-35) Warsan Shire throughout her poem is reminding the women readers about the inner strength and uniqueness that they carry and brings in the awareness to woman by telling them never to fall in the manipulations of men folks.

## Conclusion

The poets Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Warsan Shire have embraced poetry by using it as a tool for communicating and expressing their feminist ideologies and thereby extending their support and motivation to women through their writings written during their era. Though both the poets have focused on expressing their feminist ideas, we can see a wide difference in the ideologies represented by the poets in the past and present feministic poetries. This paper focused on the transformation seen in the feminist poems written by the past and contemporary writers and limited focus was given to the similarities of the same. The paper discussed how the feminist writings underwent a huge metamorphosis in respect to their cultural background, ideologies of society and the social, gender and the changes in the perceptions of women by the patriarchal society during different literary periods.

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