

*“She is fire born of the same flame  
She bears the same name  
As any other  
Burning her way  
Through the baggage and bars  
Of convention  
Of domination  
Of expectation”*

-- *Out of Now-Here*, by Malika Ndlovu (2003)<sup>1</sup>

When one thinks of poetry, the first thing that may come to mind are the posh proses of Keates, or the memories of the creaking floorboards of Poe. To the average person, poetry is probably not associated with the feminism movement. In reality, poetry played an important role in feminism, from first wave feminism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to right now in the fourth wave of feminism. This essay will examine the roots of feminist poetry, its importance in past and present movements, as well as the artists and activists who use poetry in today’s modern society to highlight the significance of the feminist movement.

Even after the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920 which granted women the right to vote, women continued to face obstacle after obstacle in the push towards equality. Beyond that, minority women of color (who were not exclusively included in mainstream suffrage movements) were often subject to many more hardships due to the multiple streams of inequality that flooded them at many different angles. They struggled to find ways to express to

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<sup>1</sup> Carole R. McCann, and Seung-kyung Kim. *Feminist Theory Reader : Local and Global Perspectives*. Vol. Fourth edition. New York: Routledge, 2017. <https://search-ebsohost-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1286222&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

others what they were going through, so that they may understand, sympathize, and aid in their struggle. However, in the patriarchal society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women still faced roadblocks, since they were deemed as unknowledgeable and incapable of independent thought, and their experiences were barely recognized as valid. Women were limited in their social interactions, mostly confined to the home, and most of their actions were shrouded in invisibility.

From these conflicts came the rise of what is called consciousness-raising. As T.V. Reed says in their essay "The Poetical is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women's Rights", consciousness-raising "involved women meeting in small discussion/action groups to share their personal experiences in order to turn them into analyses of common political and structural sources of inequality for women."<sup>2</sup> It is through these lived experiences that women were able to not only create formal theories and propose policies, but also create safe spaces for women to be open with their grievances, and find strength in those around them. These struggles included issues like reproductive rights, poverty and welfare rights, sexual harassment in the workplace, political oppression, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Consciousness-raising groups, or CR groups, became an empowering space for women to grow and learn from each other. Reed goes on to describe the process of CR groups, which consisted of four steps: opening up (sharing personal

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<sup>2</sup> Reed, T.V., "The Poetical is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women's Rights"

<sup>3</sup> Reed

feelings); sharing (via dialogue with others in the group); analyzing (finding any general patterns by comparing each other's experiences); and abstracting (creating theory).<sup>4</sup>

It is important to identify the crucial role CR groups had in the conception of more creative outlets for women in the feminism movement. Women would write their poems and share them within their groups, where their writings were then further analyzed and discussed. Reed goes on to say, "The movement helped them understand ways in which they felt marginalized, stifled, or distorted by the male-dominated institutions and formations of the poetry world. At the same time, some of these poets had anticipated feminist themes in their work and with increasing self-consciousness brought that work to bear in the context of creating the women's movement."<sup>5</sup> Creating poetry and sharing it with each other inspired more women to have their own voice and be more confident in their spoken words. It was through the loudness of these words that even already established women poets caught on and raised awareness in their often male-dominated circles.<sup>6</sup> Janet Montefiore in her essay in *The Feminist Review* titled "Feminist Identity and the Poetic Tradition" expands on the role of poetry in feminism movements, pointing out that the flexibility of poetry allows for women to further their reach in both the delivery of their poems but also the creation. She says,

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<sup>4</sup> Reed

<sup>5</sup> Reed

<sup>6</sup> Reed

“...because injustice is so coded into language, eloquence cannot transcend oppression.”<sup>7</sup> The elasticity of poetry allowed for words to be better articulated and therefore, better understood.

The period between 1960-70's made way for the rise of some of the most influential female poets in modern history. This includes the brilliant minds of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, all of whom have contributed significantly not only to poetry and the arts, but also by broadening the discourse on feminism in popular culture.<sup>8</sup> Several of these women also went on to win prestigious Pulitzer Prizes, further solidifying their authority in the world of poetry. This is not to discredit earlier prolific women poets like Emily Dickinson or Virginia Woolf. What makes the poetry produced by Angelou and the other aforementioned authors is the consciousness that they brought to the struggles of marginalized women, particularly black women, in society, struggles that would not have been able to be as widely distributed had they been in any other format like newspaper articles or journals.

Now, decades after the initial rise of CR groups, women across the world are still using poetry to describe their current struggles while also utilizing modern technology through the use of video and social media. Videos of poetry readings and performances uploaded onto streaming platforms have often gone viral after being shared on large social media outlets like Instagram and TikTok, as well as videos of celebrities and activists reciting poetry during

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<sup>7</sup> Montefiore, Janet. “Feminist Identity and the Poetic Tradition.” *Feminist Review*, no. 13 (1983): 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1394683>.

<sup>8</sup> Napikoski, Linda. “Feminist Poetry Movement of the 1960s.” ThoughtCo. ThoughtCo, July 3, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/prominent-feminist-poets-3528962>.

protests and demonstrations of activism. An article written in BBC by Holly Williams highlights the rapid rise of women and feminism poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Williams states, “By embracing politics and pop culture, embracing feminism and the reality of women’s experience – and by utilizing new technologies to just get the words out there – poetry is simultaneously attracting a new, younger audience and new, younger writers.”<sup>9</sup> In the last few years since the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, women’s rights and feminist groups have been raising their voices in protest of the former president’s treatment of women, and how his policies negatively affected women across the country.<sup>10</sup> Young women especially have been making strides in getting their peers more involved and more aware of things like the #MeToo movement and women’s reproductive health. As an example, during the Women’s March in Washington D.C. in 2020, nineteen-year-old Nina Donovan’s spoken word piece titled “Nasty Woman” famously gained significant traction after it was performed by actress Ashley Judd at the protest.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist poetry has made it possible for women to make great strides in enhancing the voices of women who thought they were alone in their battles. Since the beginning of the Women’s Rights Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a steady rise of women using creative outlets to share their experiences and learn from each other. Furthermore, these

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, Holly. “The Women Poets Taking over the World.” BBC Culture. BBC, July 14, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170713-the-women-poets-taking-over-the-world>.

<sup>10</sup> Hijazi, Jennifer. “Feminist Poetry Is Having a Renaissance. Here Are 3 Poets to Watch.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, February 2, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/feminist-poetry-is-having-a-renaissance-here-are-3-poets-to-watch>.

<sup>11</sup> Williams

shared experiences has led to the creation of legitimate theories and policies that have helped women slowly but surely continue to fight towards equality once and for all.

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