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Gail Scott's *Heroine*: Rewriting the Sexual Self and Female Sovereignty

Gail Scott's feminist novel *Heroine* is about a young Anglophone woman who moves from Ontario to Montreal during the radical politics of 1970's Quebec. She tells the story of her involvement in far left politics and her complicated relationship with a man, while she falls in love with a woman. Gail Scott plays her own protagonist in the experimental narrative that is often categorized as auto fiction. The heroine of her novel is actually in the midst of writing a novel about a modern heroine. Her writing becomes an outlet for self-expression and self-discovery. She is constantly conflicted between the woman she is expected to be and who she wants to be. Through the experience of writing a novel, and reflecting upon her experiences in her bathtub, she is able to reinvent and rewrite herself. In the midst of a patriarchal setting, the heroine uses her text as a metaphor for her body to set herself free from social constraints. She develops a sense of sovereignty over her identity, sexuality and desires, meaning she gains control and power over them as she discovers her true emotional and sexual self. This essay will discuss the way in which the novel is framed by the scene of the protagonist masturbating in the bathtub, and how that framing device is an analogy for the heroine to connect with herself and her desires. It will also discuss the expectations that are placed on her to be an ideal woman by her lover and comrades versus her ideal self and how she gains authority over her identity and sexual desires.

The novel opens up with the heroine lying in her bathtub while she masturbates. This is used to frame the novel as the heroine becomes in tune with herself and her desires both literally

and emotionally. The heroine lies in her bathtub and says, “I’m lying with my legs up. Oh, dream only a woman’s mouth could do it as well as you. Your warm faucet’s letting the white froth over the small point on the tub floor. Your single eye watches my floating smiling face in its enamel embrace” (Scott 15). Already, we can see that the heroine is thinking about her sexual desires, desires for a woman, when she says that only a woman’s mouth could please her more than the faucet’s water pouring down on the small point, which is a euphemism for her clitoris. She admits that her sexuality goes beyond heterosexuality, as she develops feelings for a woman. Over and over again throughout the novel, the story is interrupted by small snippets of her in the bathtub, masturbating and on the edge of several orgasms. In her short essay, Nicole Markotic says, “the entire plot of *Heroine* is the heroine taking a bath and masturbating. Her “quest” is to do it until she can translate her body into its own text” (Moyes 38). Her literal climax also symbolizes the climax of her story, which is her journey to self-discovery, rewriting herself as the modern heroine with authority over her identities.

Instead of having a complete ending to the heroine’s journey, Markotic says, “For Scott, who does not wish to end, merely, on a note of revenge (who does not wish to end at all), the revelation is in the writing itself. Scott rejects the final climactic movement, opting instead for the open-ended process of writing the feminine sexual self” (Moyes 44). There is no clear cut ending or resolution to the story but instead, the heroine is aware of her sexual self and is more open minded to what this means for her. This a balance of the expectations placed on her versus the reality of her true self, and more authority over her desires. In the end of the novel, she says in realization, “because suddenly I could see how survival for a woman is a little like the negative of a photo. She just has to pick the place in it where night (her deepest self) and day (reality) are combined in the right synthesis of light and dark for her. Even if it’s not quite (I

started laughing) socially acceptable” (Scott 183). Therefore, in the end, she re-invents herself as the heroine who does not necessarily care about what expectations others have of her or what is socially accepted behaviour or feelings for a woman to have. She has a balance of what her truest desires are and what her realistic self could be.

The point of writing her novel is to break free from the patriarchy’s ideal woman and to take charge of her own story. When Marie talks about her film “expressing women’s voices” (Scott 65), she explains that language revolves around patriarchy, and everything is in favour of the male population. She tells the heroine that the only way for women to re-invent themselves is to have authority over their own story. She says, “Ce qui nous empêche de nous inventer nous-mêmes. Can a woman be centred if she isn’t in charge of her own words?” (Scott 65). This is exactly what the heroine does by writing her novel about the modern heroine, who represents her ideal self. In order to write this novel, the heroine reflects on the many identities that have been placed on her by her lover and comrades of her radical political group.

The heroine deals with many identities and expectations that have been placed on her for being a woman, and because of this she is constantly trying to fit the image of an ideal woman and ideal revolutionary for Jon and the F group. In the beginning of the novel, Jon tells her that he wants an open relationship. He says, “I want to be free. No monogamy. It’s not for me” (Scott 17). Throughout the novel, the heroine remembers her past with Jon and the difficulty she had with jealousy and trying to please him by fitting his ideal woman that can handle such a relationship. She is always being told how to behave and what qualities are best in a woman. For example, she does not express her fear in Hamburg because “hysteria is not suitable in a revolutionary woman” (Scott 25). She also tells her therapist at McGill “a political woman has to be open” (Scott 34). Jon makes several comments towards her telling her what she should be

like. He says to her, “you’re too romantic; you’ll have to learn to be more realistic” (Scott 47) or that “he liked [her] best when [she] said intelligent, interesting things” (Scott 131). All of these behaviours are placed on her by Jon and the patriarchy as to what is socially acceptable for a woman and what she has to do to please Jon. She is consistently being put through the ringer to fight for his attention and affection.

The heroine struggles with her polygamous relationship with Jon because if she is herself, she is jealous, but knows that the only way he can love her is if she is open to his ideal relationships and woman. The heroine is in an oppressive relationship since she is not able to be her true self and is not allowing herself to admit what it is she wants. She has no sovereignty in this relationship. Even the language that Jon uses is oppressive towards her. He says, “in a relationship, as we decided long ago in Morocco, everybody does what he wants” (Scott 132). He uses the male pronoun only instead of saying that each person in the relationship may do as they please and take on other lovers. Meaning, as long as he gets what he wants, not being bound by a committed monogamous relationship, her feelings are invalid. In the end of the novel, her therapist says, “Gail, the problem is, you’ve lost your boundaries... Caught as you are between wanting to be your own self AND the object of his affection” (Scott 181). Instead of being true to herself and her desires, she accepts the expectations that are placed on her by Jon so she can be loved. She is told that an open relationship means freedom and “a free woman isn’t jealous or possessive” (Scott 132). Therefore, she tries to fight her jealousy and also delves into the world of polygamy by taking on another love in comrade N.

In her political group, she is cast as an outsider by being an Anglophone and being a woman. First as “LA SEULE ANGLAISE” (Scott 96), her political identity is frequently questioned by the others in her group. When the group changes their meeting location from the

Cracow Café to a new Café, the heroine is not told. When she finally finds Figaro's she is shown a group photo, which she was also not invited to, she notices Jon's absence. But he told her he was there. Obviously sensing her jealousy, the heroine believes that the comrades are "probably thinking: Uptight anglaise. No resistance" (Scott 91). Again she is considered an outsider during the group's mission placing banners to shock the bourgeoisie. She is given "the outside job" (Scott 93) and told that she will be safe in the telephone booth, "as if the English weren't as tough" (Scott 93). Not only is her English identity excluding her from the group but her female identity does as well. On a couple of occasions, she argues with the male comrades about sexual liberation and women's issues. When the heroine reads her paper "The Issue of Equal Access to Sexuality for Women in Non-Monogamous Heterosexual Couples", she is told that this has nothing to do with politics and is "plutôt hystérique" (Scott 71). She replies back, "Engels shows men have been polygamous, while expecting monogamy of women. This is oppressive. Things haven't changed as much as you think. Therefore, the issue, as all issues of oppression, deserves political debate" (Scott 71). She must argue for her right to speak about female oppression and women's issues. When she does bring it up, she is told she is being hysterical, which is what a revolutionary woman should not be, according to earlier in the text (Scott 25). This is misogynistic and oppressive in itself. Therefore, once again, the heroine is conflicted between being herself and being the self that is expected of her by others.

While the heroine reflects on her past, she thinks about what kind of woman she wants to be and what sort of modern heroine should be written in to her novel. She compares herself to others and wishes she was more like them, considering they seem to fit the image of an ideal woman better than she does. At first, the heroine is jealous of the girl with green eyes who she is

fighting against for Jon's affection, until she finds out that she is a lesbian. Then she becomes jealous of Jon's new lover D, who she compares herself to often. She says,

D said no to beer, no to coffee. I couldn't help admiring how centred she is. The way she leaned over the balcony, her black eyes narrowing in concentration as she observed the crows. She didn't even notice N lean over and pat my bottom. Ramona Rodriguez was probably like that. Politics first. (Scott 115)

The heroine compares D to the role model heroine of the novel she is writing. This role model is who she aspires to be. She pictures the heroine of her story to be strong mentally and have a hard exterior. She says her "heroine's tough, socially progressive, external image will protect her from such sentimental weakness" (Scott 98). Her heroine is someone who is not jealous, is someone who has control and authority over her desires, knows what she wants sexually and is not afraid to be herself. She is "not too halting in stating [her] desires" (Scott 123) and "wouldn't let orgasms hold her to a man" (Scott 151). She begins to realize that she needs to be more open with herself and is ready to start a journey of self-discovery.

She also struggles among other woman comrades who have a different experience with their male counterparts than she does. She pushes to have a separate meeting for female comrades. Her hope is "to discuss how two women could have comradely solidarity while being rivals for the limited affection available in one man" (Scott 121). As an effort to handle her polygamous relationship with Jon, to escape her jealousy and instead be friendly with his lovers, she sets up this meeting. But soon she realizes that the other woman in her group are experiencing the exact opposite and feels excluded and stupid. The women tell her in fact their problems lie in the possessiveness of their male partners. She explains the scene:

[one woman] told an anecdote to prove her lover's jealousy oppressed her. Another did the same. The comrade from France, holding a cigarette between her pretty lips, complained her boyfriend was too sexually demanding since she took a second lover. She'd had to ask him to sleep alone. I'm nodding and smiling like an idiot. But this isn't turning out like I expected. Looking around the circle, they all seem so cool, so in control. (Scott 121)

She wants to be as in control of her situation and desires as these women are. She admires how calm and cool they are about their open relationships and is left questioning what this means about herself as a modern heroine.

The process of writing her novel has allowed the heroine to develop her character the same way she develops her new self. Her bathtub, again, is an analogy for washing her past away and starting on a clean slate. Markotic says:

The narrator, washing herself in her bathtub, uncovers layers of herself that have been written over, identities she must *uncover* to *discover*. She is not so much ridding herself of dirt and waste; she is making the discarded into fiction, transforming debris into writing. Her determined ablutions ritualistically wash away the romantic and restricting definitions of "heroine" that she has had to confront in her attempts at another model. By the end of the novel, the narrator has given birth to herself, birth to the words that project her onto the page and out into the world beyond her bathroom. (Markotic 41-42)

As the heroine tells these stories about herself, she becomes self-aware of all the identities that she possesses, which ones she wishes to discard and which ones she wants to develop in order to re-write herself and the new and improved heroine. Everyone has been telling her what to be or how to act. They have even told her how to write her story. The heroine remembers two lesbians

who she saw in 1977 singing in a telephone booth and how they saw her writing about the scene in her book. One of them said to her, “We hope the heroine of that story isn’t a heterosexual victim. Il y en a trop dans le monde” (Scott 37). Marie is also continuously telling her to write about all of her experiences and the importance of art and writing for feminism. The novel in progress is what allows the heroine to question herself, her sexuality and her identity. She takes the matters in to her own hands in order to write herself in to her own story.

Gail Scott’s novel is about self-awareness, consciousness and female sovereignty. This feminist piece allows its protagonist to re-discover herself and the woman she wants to be. She gains control over her own subjectivity through her memories and the process of writing. She deciphers what identities and desires she wants to own, and which expectations and identities that have been placed on her by others that she wants to discard. Her sexuality and masturbation mirror the denouement of her novel. Her body is a metaphor for her text, and she must discover her body and desires before reaching climax. The climax is the goal she reaches at the end of her novel which is simply to be more open-minded and to have more power. She writes herself as the modern heroine on a journey to discover her true desires, her sexual self and re-imagine a new identity.

Works Cited

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