

Academia as a Site of Feminist Heterotopia in Carolyn Heilbrun's *Death in a Tenured Position*

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I believe that women have long searched, and continue to search, for an identity "other" than their own. Caught in the convention of their sex, they have sought an escape from gender.

--Carolyn Heilbrun *Writing a Woman's Life* 111

Abstract: This paper attempts to study Carolyn Heilbrun's *Death in a Tenured Position* as a text where academia has been depicted as a site to script feminist heterotopia,¹ an enigmatic space which is considered as a gender diluted space by Janet Mandelbaum, the protagonist of the novel. She tries to visualize the university as a place where a counter discourse of identity can be constructed. The paper would bring forth Carolyn Heilbrun's work as a bewildering welter of discourses that work towards changing our perception regarding identity formation.

Space is a language that can be employed to articulate social relationships. "Every language is located in a space. Every discourse says something about a space; and every discourse is emitted from a space" (Lefebvre 132). The paper further explores the characters in their struggle to negotiate their subjectivity as the novel deals with the negotiation of boundaries and the meaning of heterotopia. Janet in the novel tries to develop a strategy that may ensure a secure zone, for the formation of her subjective identity. Because subjectivity is formed within power relations and through discourses, these heterotopias hold the possibility for re-imagining subjectivity. I argue that Carolyn Heilbrun's politics of appropriation and transformation allows her to confront tradition, leading to breaking away from stereotypes. Her narrative works as a site of mediation, a mode of inquiry, a place to negotiate a number of poststructuralist theories and to combine them imaginatively in a fictional narrative. Carolyn Heilbrun's heterotopia of illusion creates a space of illusion that exposes every real space. The University of Harvard paradoxically, symbolizes both, the most rigidly entrenched patriarchal institutions and also a context in which feminist political interventions might take

hold, a kind of feminist heterotopia as imagined by Janet Mandelbaum, the first fictional woman professor of Harvard. My paper examines feminist resistance to prescriptive bodily policies and practices and further helps in visualizing heterotopic spaces in which new possibilities can arise--“other space”-- that disrupts the hegemonic status quo and allows for alternatives.

Key words: Feminism, heterotopia, academia, identity formation

Women still represent a minority in the higher echelons of universities and scientific institutions; this fictional work represents strategies used to keep women out. Historically the main strategy was to refuse to admit women. This refusal was accompanied by discourses devaluing women’s intellectual capacities, while stressing their domestic and motherly duties, and by the actual burdening of women with these duties. When women succeeded in entering universities, subsequent strategies have been appropriated by men including sexual harassment, anti-feminist intellectual harassment, ostracism and ridicule. The novel deals with academia which is dominated by men and how the men who are at the helm of affairs in academia are motivated by a wish to defend specific interests and privileges to keep women out of higher positions in universities.

The analysis is concerned with how the writer deals with stereotypical assumptions, gender identity and power inequality, and how the protagonist copes with socially determined traditional roles. The study attempts to verify whether her choice results in the articulation of an alternative discourse. Further it is probed that by challenging traditional representations of women, Carolyn Heilbrun may be offering a reconstruction of existing social constructs.

According to Judith Butler “Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of ‘woman,’ the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (*Gender Trouble 2*). Here Janet could not escape the patriarchal meta narrative which allows a little space to women to give them a sense of emancipation but at the same time does not allow them total assertion. It is merely an eye wash to show that much is being done to increase the representation of women in academia. Janet finds herself implicated in the very system which she wishes to free of the sexist bias.

In 1978 Harvard, the idea of women professors was still something to be viewed with, if not utter revulsion, but at least with significant apprehension. It was a time when “women’s studies” was considered a fad and an unnecessary program. As Sheila Reinharz notes:

During the so-called first wave of the women's movement in the US . . . women struggled for the right to be educated. In the second wave, women strove for additional goals related to education: the right to criticise the accepted body of knowledge, the right to create knowledge, and the right to be educators and educational administrators. (10–11)

Harvard's all men committee strategically hires Janet Mandelbaum, who also disdains such things as "women's studies" and who aspires only to succeed on merit. At misogynistic Harvard, though, to gain success simply on merit, one must first be a man. Janet faces harassment for having entered Harvard which was monopolised by men. Janet thus, finds herself ostracized, misrepresented, caricatured and ridiculed. Soon, she finds herself drugged and left in the women's room, with a sister from the commune, Luellen May. Her reputation suffers due to this embarrassingly contrived incident. Kate Fansler, a professor from New York, is asked to help out Janet, and Kate agrees; she secures a position as a Fellow and begins to consider the reason behind the attempt to discredit Janet. Soon Janet is found dead, and the police arrest Moon; Janet's ex-husband, whom Kate believes to be innocent. Kate then turns to a lawyer to help her friend while she investigates the death. Kate Fansler's investigation eventually proves that the death is a suicide precipitated in part by Janet's disappointment at not being taken seriously as an intellectual, but as some-one who represents women; 'a sort of token.' The novel highlights how "a token woman is reluctantly included in a male community" (Heilbrun 990). Harvard's perpetual misogyny is exposed and provoked by the direct intervention of Kate Fansler.

Kate suspects the entire Harvard faculty is guilty of murdering its first tenured woman professor in order to "scotch the whole scheme" of female faculty (106). The blame for Janet's suicide falls firmly on male dominated Harvard itself. As Clarkville confesses, "I do think we all behaved badly, very badly indeed. But we aren't used to dealing with women as colleagues" (Cross 140). And Kate through her investigation of the murder came to the conclusion--"We all conspired in it. We isolated her, we gave her no community. Only death welcomed her" (Cross 158).

The novel exploits a university context or space in an attempt to fathom the intersection of the female mind and the female body, and, in the process, to develop a critique of the misogyny endemic within social institutions as spaces. For Janet Mandelbaum, her body signifies sexual difference which becomes a hindrance and a cause of discrimination against

her intellectual freedom. “From the time of Aristotle, woman has been deemed inferior to man, identified as body (her genitals turned inside out), her soul debatably non-existent, and her “deliberative faculty” declared to be “without authority” (Agonito 54).

The constitutive forces outside, force Janet to loathe her female body. The insistence in an academic context on women’s bodies suggests that the body is profoundly inescapable, untranscendable of the inferiorization that is forcibly attached to it even in the loftiest of contexts:

The contrast of mind and body, of academy and “real life,” represents a standoff between feminism, in theory, that is, feminism as an idealized, abstracted, often times academic pursuit and feminism in practice, which involves difficult demands of the body, of the daily degradations and humiliations that put theory to the test, find it wanting, and foregrounds the work needed to be done to fine-tune its generalizing assumptions. (Dever 185)

Janet’s situation in Harvard typifies to the atmosphere of ridicule, contempt and sexual reductionism. “The instances of harassment do not have to be physical in order to do harm. Sexual remarks and misogynist comments, coupled with social ostracism and marginalization, represent an assault on the integrity and self-esteem of women, challenging her capacity to perform her job effectively, undermining her ability to develop any sustained sense of professional competence, and draining her creative energy in the endless need to invent stratagems of self-protection” (Kolodny 17).

In the novel Janet Madelbaun’s career is stunted by the male dominance in academia. The atmosphere of covert and overt hostility towards her makes her unable to act in Harvard on her own terms. Harvard’s English Department emerges even more powerfully as the emblem of patriarchal privilege rather than a heterotopia as imagined by Janet. The men in academia feel that women have invaded a male territory and appropriated male prerogatives. It echoes the anti-feminist discourse characteristic of the backlash in their behaviour towards women. They create a highly hostile environment, in which women educators feel unwelcome in academia.

Janet did work towards a change of gender norms but failed. Janet stood for queer; at odd with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant. She tried to rise above the confines of

identity and reinvent herself on her own terms. Janet's non-conformation to the radical feminist movement was seen as a threat to the feminist movement. She is detested by the women of the commune. Janet is unable to comprehend the reality of her own existence: that she must seek to establish her identity in the hyphenated space between feminists and patriarchs. Her self-actualization beyond the binaries becomes a cause of trouble. Having resisted or rejected the roles and expectations of a hegemonic male culture, Janet finds herself between, neither altogether here nor there, not one kind of person or another. Rather than viewing such liminality as negative, Heilbrun sees it as positive, offering the possibility of self-creation. Liminality is thus closely allied with feminism, broadly defined, in the sense that it permits creativity on both personal and professional levels.

The university, paradoxically, symbolizes both the most rigidly entrenched patriarchal institutions and also a context in which feminist political interventions might take hold. In this it stands somewhat optimistically for the potential of feminism to transform the world by active participation in the academia. It has been suggested through the belated regret of the male professors who sort of precipitated the suicide of Janet by their behavior towards women in academia.

As fictional text, this novel clearly has much at stake in underscoring the importance of fictional and literary works to a larger feminist project. It is hinted and implied in the text that institutions like Harvard can become the sites upon which the semiotic war of alternative images would take place and newer meanings would be disseminated. Harvard is viewed as a heterotopia by Janet where she could escape the fate of her gender. Heterotopia is a concept in human geography elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe places and spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions. Janet's death sort of paves the way for future developments in institutions of higher education.

The novel also asks certain pertinent questions as to whether the entry of women in public spaces signifies gender equality. The architectural exclusion of women from Harvard only underscores a more widespread pattern of exclusion justified by the generally accepted belief that women are lesser intellectuals than men. As long as the public sphere continues to use sexualized notions projecting the two genders as unequal, mere entering the public spaces by women would not signify gender equality. Universities, like Harvard are sites of socialization where the traditional values of gender are stored and imparted. As such, these institutions can be viewed as arenas from which the solutions to gender related conflicts could be found.

There are still strong gender divisions within established professions and within the academy, with men continuing to occupy powerful decision-making positions. The death of Janet rustles Harvard to challenge the male monopoly of knowledge and exclusion of women from both the production of knowledge and positions of power. Women within institutions of higher learning can help in developing an oppositional discourse within academia. The “other place” created by feminist resistance provides fertile soil for engaging in practices of freedom and re-imagining female subjectivity. Academic institutions do have a significant role in regulating power to shape how people and culture think about women and gender systems. Universities can serve as a potential site for development of knowledge to be disseminated in the society; for which women should be built into the foundational assumptions of universities and not just be treated as token additions.

It is important to recognize that the episodes that have been described in the novel represent part of a strategy to keep women out of Academia or from power positions within it. The analysis of the position of women in academia, along with social and political pressures has led to new laws and other social measures to make the environment for women in academia more conducive and inclusive. Women have struggled to win the right not only to know but also to produce legitimized knowledge and, within universities, to pass on this knowledge to the younger generation. Their struggle to be insiders and the results of this struggle have been made possible by the presence of a strong feminist movement outside academia, and by the political, ethical and intellectual stimulation it has provided. As is forcefully summarized by the Task Force on the Status of Women in Academe of the American Psychological Association: “It should be understood that the aim is not simply to help women succeed in obsolete patriarchal institutions but rather to reconstruct those institutions” (Kite et al. 1080).

Thus, academia becomes a heterotopia, a counter site, a place that does exist and is formed in the very founding of a society, it is a place where a variety of other sites can be represented, contested and inverted (Foucault 24). Carolyn Heilbrun is uncompromising in holding up a mirror to the position of women in a university that treats them as a gender secondary to that of the males. More practically, Heilbrun has made visible these strategies of discrimination. If we cannot acknowledge conflict and imperfections, the ideologies that inform our practices can go unscrutinized even in the loftiest of contexts like Harvard.

Notes

1. Heterotopia is a concept in human geography elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe places and spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions. These are spaces of *otherness*, which are irrelevant, that are simultaneously physical and mental, such as the space of a phone call or the moment when you see yourself in the mirror.

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