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Suffrage Movement and the Subversion of the 'Juridico-Discursive' Power in the Victorian Period: Elizabeth Robins and The Concept of 'New Women'

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-historical subversion of 'juridico-discursive' power in the late Victorian period. It briefly investigates the rise of the British suffrage movement and highlights the role of 'suffrage drama' as its social apparatus. The authors demonstrate how suffrage artists, especially the playwright/actress Elizabeth Robins, acted against the dominant patriarchal hegemony and were in frontline of social uprisings. It is argued that 'Suffrage drama' as a 'place of tolerance' functioned as an antithesis to the mainstream theatre and challenged the conventional dramatic forms practiced prior to its birth. Suffrage drama provided a space for women to have their collective voice heard in a social and political context in the early Victorian era. Elizabeth Robins, mostly acknowledged for enacting women heroines of Ibsen's plays, became an invaluable inspirational figure for suffrage women as she was the actress in whom the strong concept of the 'New Woman' was incarnated.

Keywords: Suffrage Movement, Elizabeth Robins, Suffrage Drama, Foucault, Ibsen.

INTRODUCTION

Although making few references to women, the poststructuralist Michel Foucault (1926-1984) tremendously inspired feminist scholars to question about the dominant power, body, gender, and sexual relations. Gender theorists such as Judith Butler (1956) heavily drew from his hypothesis that body and sexuality are social/cultural constructs that are manipulated via sets of apparatuses.[1] In *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1* (1976), while delineating the development of sexuality in European culture, Foucault asserts that sexuality is defined throughout a sets of repressive laws and limits – what he calls the juridico-discursive power - that ruling people objectify.[2]

In the following paragraphs, we provide an analysis of how women artists of suffrage movement attempted to subvert the contemporary juridico-discursive power with unscrupulously operating against the artistic hegemony of the early Victorian period. The term 'artistic hegemony' is utilized as a parallel concept for 'cultural hegemony'.[3] Women's challenging of artistic hegemony (developed consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or accidently) occurred for the first time, as a collective movement, in the early twentieth century and put an end to the socially descending 'juridico-discursive' power.[4]

Throughout the history, ruling classes always wanted to use Art as one of their controlling apparatuses, what Marxists call 'superstructure'. However, the intrinsic nature of Art is irrepressible and it is why it

[1] Feminist also found Foucault's theories restrictive in some places as it makes social agents equal with docile entities, but dealing with this account is beyond the scope of this paper.

[2] It should not be neglected that Foucault makes it clear that discourse is much more insidious than legal precepts and works through regimes of knowledge, not statutes. However, for simplification of argument the authors suffice to generalize them as sets of laws and prohibitions.

[3] In Marxism, specifically in theories of Italian Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), cultural hegemony refers to the domination of socio-cultural norms exerted by ruling class on a society.

[4] Since the Enlightenment period, women tried to oppose the oppressive patriarchy more systematically with their writing. Maybe the most well-known treatise is from Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).

has mostly been on the side of repressed people. Relevantly, during British suffrage movement, women utilized Art, that is drama and theatre, for the first time in women's history to publically criticize the oppressions on them.[5]

In Victorian England, women centered their political activities around establishing women organizations and debating over the concept of disenfranchisement. In 1832, the extension of the ballot "had happened over the Household Franchise Bill, and since then women had become involved politically in social affairs" (Pankhurst, 2010, p. 10). It was not until 1872 that various women groups united and worked as a collective force in the UK's political milieu. Women organizations joined together and formed a constitutional campaign named 'The National Society for Women's Suffrage' led by Lydia Becker (1827-1890). This campaign began to agitate for 'votes for women' in a "culture that was not ready to see women participating equally with men in the political arena" (Risk, 2012, p. 385). With the pursuit of universal suffrage, women were at the same time pursuing social independence, college education, widespread national health reform, equal job opportunities, and most importantly equal pay, which could in turn free them from home imprisonment. In the Victorian society women were limited still in their private spheres and were not accepted in public areas.

In the late nineteenth century, the generic belief was that "the family is woman's proper sphere.' (Van, 1999, p. 44).[6] This polarity pushed women into disappearance from social context and operated, in Foucault's wordings, "as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (Foucault, 1978, p. 4). This denigrating feeling of non-existence finally provoked resistance among the Victorian women and made them seek for "places of tolerance" in order to openly express their discontents. At this status, women needed "nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an eruption of speech" to achieve their goals (Ibid, 5). Foucault maintains that desire (suffrage) exists when there is a despotic power (male oppression). This 'juridico-discursive' conception of repressive power restricts people to pursue their goals and limits them to the pre-defined roles. This primarily made the women unable to gain suffrage through the legislation.[7] Suppression increased 'discourse' on prohibitions, and these discourses brought about the outlets. Foucault calls the practitioners of these outlets 'perverts' and the outlet itself 'perversion'. Perversion is one of the main consequences of exerting juridico-discursive power and will result in the revolutionary outburst overthrowing the dominant power. In Britain, this outlet to gain suffrage had two major wings: the *suffragists* and the *suffragettes*.

ESTABLISHED OUTLETS FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE REPRESSION: NUWSS AND WSPU, THE "OTHER VICTORIANS"

In 1897, Millicent Fawcett united many local suffrage groups in United Kingdom and formed the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The members of this union, known as suffragists, were mostly from middle-class women. They hoped that by smart negotiations, they could convince politicians to give them social rights including suffrage. They believed that by any other kinds of discourse, [e.g. violent protests and hostile demonstrations], women would only represent themselves irresponsible and hysteric. Their semi-conservative strategies helped them to recruit male members and gradually progress in their aims.

On the other side were Suffragettes who were part of NUWSS until 1903. However, with the leading of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, the Suffragettes splintered off the NUWSS and established the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). This organization, as Sheila Stowell points out, "offered feminists a new militant image that helped to spur women of all classes, talents, and occupations to renew political and social action" (Stowell, 1992, p. 1). Suffragettes, who were mostly from working-class women, believed that they could not achieve their goals by respectable and gradualist tactics. With their motto "deeds not words", they started to practice militant methods in their campaigns.[8] Their extremist approach and political agitation caused many suffra-

[5] Before this movement, there were women dramatists, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, but they were more cautious in their narratives and even wrote sometimes in pseudonyms.

[6] Of course the concept of two spheres dates back to the 18th century; however, women's sphere was still defined with their role of motherhood and housekeeping. It was not until suffrage movement that this polarity was openly questioned.

[7] Foucault clarifies that power does not simply come down from above, and all power patterns cannot be recognized as dominant-dominated (male/female), rather power associations appear at all levels of society irrespective of the dominant powers. Although it is likely to pinpoint schemes and policies in power relationships, there are no particular subjects exercising this power. There is a prudence and reasoning behind power relationships, but there is no furtive group or intelligence directing these relationships (see Foucault 1978, p. 94).

[8] For more on this see Purvis and Holton (2000).

gettes land in jail. They violently pursued the right to vote as they believed the right to vote was their "only weapon to bring about the social legislation" (Purvis, 2002, p. 79). The Suffragettes' radical actions overshadowed other liberal activists' strategies. Their civil disobedience and militant strikes made headlines in medias. Although NUWSS and WSPU later fragmented into multiple groups with opposing tactics and differing approaches, they had one shared goal: women's freedom, which was foreseeable according to Foucault's theory of repression. However, as historian Diane Sainsbury asserts that "a key ingredient in the suffrage movement's success was its vigorous lobbying activities" (Sainsbury, 1999, p. 70).

Women's movement in this era had three major prongs: first, they demonstrated and delivered public speeches. Second, they published their own independent newspapers and journals, including *Votes for Women*, *The Suffragette*, and *Britannia.* Third, they wrote and performed suffrage drama. All these strategies were in contradiction with the fostering aims of the dominant political system. Riots and demonstrations caused distracting seizure though for a short time. Growing unrest, both in numbers and intensity, accumulated a new identity and challenged the dominant system. Many of the suffragettes were arrested during these demonstrations. Between 1906 and 1914, as Diane Atkinson observes, "over a thousand suffragettes served their sentences in Holloway [Prison]" (Atkinson, 1988, p. 95). Many have gone on food strikes and were forced-fed. Journals and theatres, by covering the news and promoting the movement's demands, helped in re-identification of women in this period.

Women in the context of suffrage movement did not have enough power and strong lobbies to produce feminist plays in mainstream theatre, simply because the people in charge were mostly men who managed theatres. Women were only utilized in theatrical environments in places where men wanted them mostly as actresses. And female acting was for a long time mostly associated with prostitution. Indeed, "the term public woman," as Angela V. John writes, "was used interchangeably for performer and prostitute" (John, 1995, p. 19). Moreover, by the choice of costume, gesture, and mise en scene, women would become the direct target of male gaze. By equating actresses with prostitutes, their social entity was both manipulated and repressed. They were inappropriately misrepresented in contrast to shiny masculinity. As Holton puts it, "such forms of masculinism rest upon a more active resort to sexual stereotyping than those characterized by gender blindness. They work by allowing women to take center stage, but only by infantilizing them or giving them roles drawn from farce, the comic postcard and the clinic. They rely, too, of course, on an enormous degree of generalization" (Holton, 2011, p. 832). Foucault maintains that power acts as a kind of law that regulates how females should be assumed and understood, and this is why he believes that juridico-discursive power socially structures people. For Foucault, "the pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator; and its mode of action with regard to sex is of a juridico-discursive character" (Foucault, 1978, p. 83). Power is enforced as law (discourse of knowledge); the more it is violated, the freer violators will be. In such situation, one of the elementary practices of marginalized groups [women] is creating new form of artistic presentation in independent spaces. Women activists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who could not represent themselves in mainstream theater, decided to express themselves via suffrage drama in alternative theatres.

SUFFRAGE DRAMA: ELIZABETH ROBINS, WWSL AND AFL

Drama, literature, music and more generally 'Art' has the power to question, answer, solve, create problem, make or calm down a crisis. Either it solves the internal conflicts instantly as Aristotle believes via catharsis, or will encourage the audience to go and solve it outside theatres as evokes Brecht's epic theatre. Likewise, Suffrage drama played an incredibly important role in suffragists' achievement. Suffrage drama, as a general term, refers to a form of dramatic literature which emerged during the suffrage movement. Suffrage dramas are limited to the time span of 1907 to 1914. Suffrage theatre attempted to deconstruct the cliché images of female sentimentality and irrationality, and rebuild strong responsible 'beings'. Suffrage dramas were mostly based on female protagonists who could persuade the anti-suffragist figures by influential convincing speeches to support women rights. Nonetheless, critically speaking, the suffrage drama, did not dissociate totally from bourgeois ideology. Although many women from working-class groups were involved in demonstrations and political crises, the characters represented on the stage were mostly from the middle-class women (Joannou, 2010, p. 188). Also the settings, as in Elizabeth Robin's *Votes for Women*, would be a middle-class family house with bourgeois lifestyle, dialects, and attitudes.

The playwright Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952) played an important role in creating and solidifying the suffrage drama in the early years of the twentieth century. The suffrage drama in form and content

pursued the realist school of dramatic literature. However, it functioned as a propaganda in favor of women's rights. The plays within this genre usually consist of all-female cast and all-female production staff. As Ann Heilmann asserts, "by making women characters the focus of the narrative voice, writers first and foremost appealed to their contemporary readers to adopt a (multiplicity of) female viewpoint(s) as opposed to the conventional male vantage point which shapes so much even of oppositional Victorian literature" (Heilmann, 2000, p. 9). Suffrage drama became quite popular and prevalent in two artistic communities in early twentieth century: Women Writers' Suffrage League, and the Actresses' Franchise League, both founded by Elizabeth Robins. It was from the heart of these leagues that first wave of feminist theatre had been born. Among the prominent members of these two leagues were Ellen Terry, Edith Craig, Kitty Marion, and Elizabeth Robins. Robins became quite well-known for enacting women in Ibsen's plays in London.

The style of suffrage drama, and its concept of "New Woman," were direct influences of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). Ibsen, whose plays were extendedly performed on British stage at that time, had already introduced the concept of 'new woman' to the world with his major plays, *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1891). *A Doll's House* manifested a vital step in the depiction of modern women. Although Ibsen argued that his play is not a direct treatise on women and their issues, "the timing of the English production turned it into something more [feminist]" (John, 1995, p. 53). Unlike suffrage feminists, Ibsen never accepted that his plays were written for the sake of women's emancipation and advancement of their social circumstances though his plays were and are mostly used and quoted on feminist grounds. The feminist theatre primarily was fueled with the energy of the rebelling characters like Nora, Hedda, and Hilda. Interestingly all these characters became well-known to the world and British stage by their impersonation by Elizabeth Robins. Robins dedicated herself to Ibsen's drama and non-commercial theatre before turning to the writing career. A prolific writer, Robins mainly addressed different recent women issues including "women's sexual passion in *Alan's Wife* (1893), conversion to the WSPU in *The Convert* (1907), and pacifism in *Ancilla's Share* (1924)" (Scott 1995, 62). Robins retired from acting before 1900 and devoted herself to the suffrage movement and started to write pro-suffrage plays and novels including the play *Votes for Women* (1907), "the longest and the most ambitious of the suffrage plays" (Joannou 2010, 188), and the novel *The Convert* (1907).

What can be acknowledged in Robins's written works is that Ibsen's footprints can be vividly perceived here and there in her texts. Among prominent features of Ibsen's which are apparent in Robins' works are his use of double-density dialogue see (Meyer, 1985), the development of an introspective gesture, known as the autistic gesture (Gay Gibson Cima, 1983, p. 22), and using characters speaking colloquial speech can be mentioned. Robins most prominent play, *Votes for Women*, is considered as an inaugurating suffrage drama (John, 1995, p. 2), pursuing another Ibsenite technique: silence to speech. In this play, Vida who is taken by other women as a silent mysterious woman in the first act, goes and speeches in front of a group of unsettled men in the second. This play also traces the development of women in general, from silence to protest.

Before Robins acting Hedda Gabler in 1891, women were mainly playing roles in melodramas. Robins notes in her paper on Ibsen that "creation of believable, modern, intelligent women on stage who were not simplified stereotypes was in itself a breakthrough to Ibsen that the world was effectually familiarized with the fact that woman's soul no less than her brother's is the battleground of good and evil" (Robins, 1908). Ibsen's' concept of 'new woman' impacted both the actors who played in his shows and those who saw the shows. According to Katherine E. Kelly, "the women who performed, translated and attended Ibsen performances deliberately distinguished themselves from the majority of public opinion that viewed Ibsen as diseased, degenerate, and unseemly" (Kelly, 2008, p. 26). Along with socio-political activism, the suffrage drama helped women activists understand the concept of the 'New Woman'. The coinage of the word, 'New Woman' has its own history:

> The term the "New Woman" was coined in England in March 1894 when Sarah Grand, whose well-known novel *The Heavenly Twins* appeared the previous year, published "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" in the *North American Review*. In the essay she uses the phrase "the new woman" to denote the woman who has finally "solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy." Within two months the phrase the "New Woman," now printed with capital letters, was ubiquitous. (Nelson, 2001, p. ix).

Ibsen's 'new women', in contrast with the conventions of patriarchal families, rebelled against the dominant misogynistic norms, and asked for independence. After Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw (1856-

1950) and Henry James (1843-1916) developed and popularized the concept of 'new woman' more than any other literary figures in the turn of the twentieth century. However, the one who paid the most influential tribute to this concept and materialized it was Elizabeth Robins. Robins impersonated the concept of 'New Women' primarily with the character of Hedda Gabler. Robins herself writes, "I came to think of my early life as divisible into two parts: before or after Hedda" (quoted in John 1995, p. 55).

An era in which Ibsen was a major influence, and having strong women like Elizabeth Robins on stage, definitely advertised and promoted the concept of 'New Woman'. Robins, as Brenda R. Weber points out, "stands as a testament to the trials and epistemological shifts that accompanied the transition from Victorian to modern, particularly in a context of transatlantic nationalisms" (Weber, 2011, p. 486). As an epitome of a New Woman, "Hedda Gabler signified an anger that the actresses' professional reliance on popularity with audiences prohibited them from expressing more directly and assertively" (Farfan, 1996, p. 59). Relevantly, Robins became a target for many verbal insults and critical attacks for foreshadowing independent women. And of course this angers from male institutions were the reverberations of the falling power seeking resurrection.

Through the impersonation of Hedda Gabler, Elizabeth Robins "made 'vice' attractive. She has almost ennobled crime. She has stopped the shudder that so repulsive a creature should have inspired. She has glorified an unwomanly woman. She has made a heroine out of a sublimated sinner. She has fascinated us with a savage." (Scott, 1977, p. 227). Robins was outspoken toward the male critics. In one of her lectures, "Ibsen and the Actress," she addresses her critique to the critic Clement Scott and stated, "Mr. Clement Scott understand Hedda?—any man except that wizard Ibsen really understand her? Of course not. That was the tremendous part of it. How should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn't understand her in the persons of their wives, their daughters, their woman friends?" (Robins, Ibsen and the Actress, 1973, p. 18). One reviewer of *The Stage* described Robins: "not a woman but a thing; a beast degraded from womanhood; half an idiot and very much of a devil' (The Stage, 1891).

Hedda, and of course Ibsen's other new women, Nora and Hilda, tremendously helped changing the stage and audiences' views towards women. Robins, and her feminist contemporaries were inspired with these characters. Such inspirational characters inaugurated the birth of feminism in two major ways: First, by their introduction of new women on stage, they have provided examples for people who have forgotten the very sense of womanhood. Second, they exercised their role as women practitioners in a male environment. In fact, playwrights like Robins, planted the seed and encouraged the later feminists to practice 'Herstory'. It was about 1970s that the term 'Herstory' got popular in feminist discourse. The term comes from an 1875 "childhood story" of Robin's entitled "The Herstory of a Button." By writing herstory, as Ellen Rooney asserts, "a meaning beyond the personal, the act of self-exposure takes on a political justification, and could be seen as deriving its necessity not from individual desire but from a painful quest for truths, hidden by society, which could be reclaimed and made available for others" (Rooney, 2006, p. 122).

CONCLUSION

In contrast to pro-suffrage drama/theatre, there were many anti-suffrage plays and cartoons which labeled women as sentimental, irresponsible, and hysteric. Among them were *The Spirit of Seventy-Six; or, The Coming Woman, A Prophetic Drama* (1868) by Ariana Randolph Wormeley Curtis and Daniel Sargent Curtis, and a comedy *The New Woman* (1984) by Sydney Grundy. In these plays, men reacted passionately against women by ridiculing the concept of New Woman, prophesying that they would make themselves ill and destroy national life, insisting that they were rebelling against nature (Bederman, 1995).

Suffrage movement achieved its goals in 1928 with the right of votes for all women aged 21 and older. Many historians believe that modern liberal feminism has shaped through suffrage movement. However, the concept of feminism has changed. The definitions have changed. A 'New Woman', for Elizabeth Robins and many other Suffragists, was someone beyond a woman riding a bicycle, smoking a cigar, or wearing jeans. Robins and her contemporary female intellectuals had learned the meaning of individuality and self-construction from Ibsen and Hedda Gabler. Nevertheless, they did not confine themselves to isolate characters imprisoned at home, as did Ibsen's. They cultivated a strong inner self that would transcend the individual body and would construct a collective mass. As we see in Robins's *Votes for Women*, Vida, the protagonist of the play who had committed an infanticide, would forgive the Stoner in that he supports the suffrage movement. What counted most importantly in suffrage themes was crossing from darkness to light even by sacrificing the self.

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