

‘chronicles of female triumph’: romance readership and the pursuit for empowerment...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"Chronicles of Female Triumph" [1] : Romance Readership and The Pursuit of Empowerment:

Are readers of the romance genre oppressed by their seemingly unquestionable subscription to a narrative whereby a fundamentally patriarchal relationship exists at its centre? This is the underlying interrogation to which these readers are constantly subjected to; stereotypes surrounding the portrait of the romance reader mostly pertain to negative images of unintelligent, uneducated, or even irrational women- often based upon notions of novel's content themselves. Indeed, for if the romance novels themselves are observed as poorly written and formulaic, then portraits of the readers that transpire are heavily partial to the content they are reading. Such damnations are not new phenomenon brought in recent inspections- if one looks back at the standard of 18th century reaction to popular fiction for women, it is the same line of argument that remains to be a point of contention today. Mary Wollstonecraft, criticised the romance novels of her time for constructing women preoccupied with romantic a fantasy that can never truly be realised- for making them "creatures of sensation"[2]

Romance reading has been examined by scholars through a similar lens, though, as demonstrated by Mary Wollstonecraft, the critics who appear to level the most serious charges against the genre are women, for they claim that female readers (and writers) of romance novels are oppressed by their commitment to a narrative whereby an essentially patriarchal relationship exists at its core; when Germaine Greer, in her monumental account *The Female Eunuch* (1970) , stood boldly against the romance's "utterly

<https://assignbuster.com/chronicles-of-female-triumph-romance-readership-and-the-pursuit-for-empowerment/>

ineffectual heroine”,[3]she did so as a stance against the romance’s apparent antagonism toward the intrinsic principles of (second-wave) feminism. Indeed, for Greer unequivocally positions the romance novel as anti-feminist, “ escapist literature of love and marriage voraciously consumed by housewives”[4]- of bored readers who simply elect to pass through their time rather than challenge it. This homogenous grouping of romance readers as strictly ‘ housewives’ is significant. Greer’s declarative is intended as a damning one, for it suggests that readers captured by the genre are the same specific people who subject themselves to their own demise by willingly electing to become the ‘ housewife’ figure in the first place, serving no purpose other than in their secondary role as wife and mother. Thus, her account, in making the case for the feminist agenda, renders itself an internalised attack on women themselves, rather than the patriarchal system they are subjected to by default; it infers that the romance novel and the housewife are mutually deserving of damnation because of the subjugation they inflict upon themselves in perpetuating patriarchal hegemonic values. Thus, emerging from critical accounts such as this one, despite attempts to recover or defend her, is a notion of a passive and apathetic reader who believes the delusions of the romantic fantasies she consumes. Such a portrayal is harder to confront than other stereotypes that can be disproven with statistics. For example, while the average romance reader may work “ outside the home and is college educated—not uneducated or unintelligent”,[5]it is much harder, however, to demonstrate that the ‘ average’ romance reader is not merely passively waiting for Prince Charming to rescue her in her own life.[6]

This stereotyping of readership is inescapable because it is related to the genre's content, particularly for the convention for a 'happy ending'. As the one formal feature within the romance genre that most can identify, this universal device, the journey of a heterosexual relationship which typically culminates in marriage, prompts the greatest condemnations from its critics. Such a union, they protest, is problematic because it anticlimactically enslaves the heroine and thus, by extension, the reader.[7]The heroine is extinguished within the confines of her own story as any independently orientated narrative are negated by marriage, and the reader is also encouraged to act accordingly. Thus, as Pamela Regis highlights, because this charge claims that the form of the romance novel genre- its conclusion of marriage- extinguishes the heroine and binds the reader, every romance novel, by virtue of its being a romance novel, must exercise these same powers to extinguish and bind.[8]Under this assumption, *Jane Eyre* (1847), as a widely celebrated gothic romance masterpiece, must, by association, subject Jane and its readers to these same constraints. Notwithstanding, it is Jane who emphatically carves out her own destiny, and this perhaps signals the strongest feminist assertion of the novel. Jane chooses to pursue a new life away from Rochester: 'It was mytime to assume ascendancy. My powers were in play and in force.'[9]At the end of the novel, when St. John is about to embark upon his missionary work and repeatedly asks Jane to accompany him as his wife, it is once again Jane's own "independent will"[10]that she emphatically exercises in her refusal to agree, on the grounds that doing so would mean compromising her capacity for passion in a loveless marriage. Instead, her thoughts drawn back to Rochester and decides to seek him out.

After discovering that the estate has burned down and that Rochester,
<https://assignbuster.com/chronicles-of-female-triumph-romance-readership-and-the-pursuit-for-empowerment/>

blinded during the fire, resides nearby, they reunite again. However, while this ending to the novel does conclude in a marriage, the empowering significance lies within Jane's volition to do so. Brontë thus meticulously crafts her heroine's free agency throughout the novel because and of in spite of these patriarchal conditions she is subjected to: " I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you." [11]

This question of female agency within the genre and its readers have been much contented. Indeed, as Modleski maintains, it is easy for one to assume that endorsing these narratives solidifies an " immense identification between reader and protagonist" [12]-that the action of reading a particular book infers an unquestioning endorsement of its ideology. Such a sweeping implication is problematic for it assumes that romance readers do not possess a framework that simultaneously accounts for the combining of an objective comprehension of their position in relation to men and a subjective nod to their own practice of reading. Again, this seems to nod toward questions of reader intelligence- that they do not possess the capacity to be self-aware. Further, it is important to remember that readers are at liberty to ignore or reject and otherwise read detachedly from the novel's form. After all, as proven by the readers' reports to Janice Radway, in her study of romance readers, the act of the purchase does not always signify an endorsement of content. [13] When considering reader consciousness, this would certainly herald activity on the part of reader, not just passive acceptance- that they are able to locate a sense of empowerment in reading romance novels by being agents of their own interpretations. As Brontë champions, " it is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied

with tranquillity: they must have action; they will make it if they cannot find it.”[14]

Indeed, the proliferation of modern technology has assisted in giving romance readers a plethora of information about romance fiction on the internet. A mode of contacting one other, there are approximately fifty specific websites dedicated to romantic fiction itself, and eleven chat groups which allow their readers to talk directly to one another.[15]For example, the website All About Romance- one of these websites, even features an interactive column entitled “ At the Back Fence”, whereby readers are about to partake in discussions devoted to the issues surrounding their latest favourite, or least favourite, romance that they care to raise in a safe and non-judgmental space[16]. Further, as platforms such as these, continue to evolve with the evolvment of technology, more and more readers of the genre are uniting through a same shared adoration- the line between internal and external begins to blur, and with it, one’s sense of the internal self is slowly externalized. Thus, in participating in a community of readers who enjoy the genre and therefore lack the same critical judgment of the genre’s ‘ frivolousness’, readers are able to access empowerment and agency through their own means, regardless of the topic and content of the text, simply by allowing them a space to partake- even to offer their disapproval into the dialogue.[17]Of course, this is not a strictly new phenomenon. Radway’s 1984 study noted that Dot, as a book shop owner, engaged in conversation surrounding romance book suggestions with her customers. While these communications occurred on a small scale, and, as Radway admitted herself, the group included a sample of women who

matched each other in experience, the premise was the same. Now, however, the proliferation of the internet, and its capacity to connects romance readers together does so on a global scale, regardless of race, class, or even gender. This multitude of voices enable the conversation surrounding the romance to be uncompromising about the manner in which they discuss it- readers can thus examine culture in constructive ways; they are not necessarily constructed by it.[18]

This notion of reader interpretation is also exhibited in other romance subgenres such as Chick-lit. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), certainly demonstrates a willing invitation for its readers to do so. " We were always taught, instead of waiting to be swept off our feet, to ' expect little, forgive much'"[19], reports Bridget. Whilst a one-sided conversation, the diary form of the novel also allows for the communication of a particular woman's internal self to an audience. In offering this to the reader, as Jane does in her asides in *Jane Eyre* , she is able to align herself within her readers by demonstrating an immersion into a shared female experience. Fielding skillfully adopts humour as mean of comprehending Bridget's failings in love. Importantly, however, beneath this self-deprecation is a desire to communicate a (heterosexual) female pursuit to escape the patriarchal structures of Western society, that: " One must not live one's life through men but must be complete on oneself as a woman of substance."[20]Thus, the small victories Bridget accumulates as she stumbles through her romantic woes enable for tangible character growth to the reader. Such comedic (and seemingly peripheral) elements of the plot actually serve as a principal means of comprehending the patriarchy she is subjected to. By

following this light-hearted account of a woman not so dissimilar to themselves, contemporary readers are able to constructively appraise their own lives therein. Thus, romance novels serve as a means of comprehending the universal problems faced by their female readers – whatever their position. Importantly, that is not to say that the genre removes said challenges. Quite the opposite; if the reader is to root for the heroine throughout her quest of conquering love, it is important to immerse oneself in the potential mishappenings she faces. Thus, it is necessary for these blatant patriarchal markers to exist in order to comprehend and subvert them. Hence, romance novels, dismissed for their frivolousness, are, in fact, capable of facilitating a shift in the discourse of women's lives through candidly validating an association of shared heterosexual female experience whereby readers can glean their own empowerment, even if only temporarily.

Bibliography:

- Bronte, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* (London: Wordsworth Publishers, 1992)
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990)
- Fielding, Helen, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador Publishers, 2014)
- Goade, Sally. *Empowerment Versus Oppression: Twenty-First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels* . (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2007)
- Greer, Germaine, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1970).

- Kamble, Jayashree, 'Female Enfranchisement and the Popular Romance: Employing an Indian Perspective' *Empowerment versus Oppression, Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, ed. Sally Goade (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).
- Krentz, Jayne Ann, "Introduction." *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance* . Ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (New York: Harper Collins, 1996)
- Modleski, Tania, "The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances." *Signs* , vol. 5, no. 3, 1980, pp. 435–448. *JSTOR* , JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3173584.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A48c3770e8971936607ba265e7f2cc8f5>
- Radway, Janice, *A Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* . (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
- Regis, Pamela . *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* . (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
- Roach, Catherine *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 2016)
- Struve, Laura. 'Sisters of Sorts: Reading Romantic Fiction and the Bonds among Female Readers.' *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44. 6 (2011), pp. 1289–1306 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00901.x>
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* . Ed. Carol H. Poston, 1792. (New York: W. W. Norton Publishers, 1988)

[1]Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* . (Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroline Press, 1991) p. 48

[2]Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* . Ed. Carol H. Poston, 1792. (New York: W. W. Norton Publishers, 1988) p. 61

[3]Greer, Germaine, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1970) p. 185

[4]Greer, *The Female Eunuch* , p. 212

[5]Struve, Laura. ' Sisters of Sorts: Reading Romantic Fiction and the Bonds among Female Readers.' *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44. 6 (2011), p. 1293

[6]Struve: *Sisters of Sorts* , p. 1293

[7]Regis, Pamela . *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) p. 9

[8]Regis, *A Natural History* , p. 11

[9]Bronte, Charlotte *Jane Eyre* (London: Planet of Three Publishing, 2004) p. 405

[10]Brontë, *Jane Eyre* , p. 398

[11]Brontë: *Jane Eyre*, p. 294

[12]Modleski, Tania, " The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances." *Signs* , vol. 5, no. 3, 1980, p. 439

[13]Radway, Janice, *A Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* . (Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroline Press, 1991). p. 50

[14]Brontë, *Jane Eyre* p . 123

[15]Struve: *Sisters of Sorts* , p. 1294

[16]Struve, *Sisters of Sorts* , p. 1294

[17]Struve, *Sisters of Sorts* , p. 1294

[18]Struve, *Sisters of Sorts* , p. 1294

[19]Fielding, Helen *Bridget Jones's Diary* London: Picador Publishers, 2014) p. 169

[20]Fielding: *Bridget* , p. 31