

Gender myths in the female man



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The Female Man begins with a direct challenge to the patriarchy in particular the patriarchal methodology used in silencing women. Before the narrative even begins, R. D. Laing is quoted from *The Politics of Experience* with a hypothetical situation in which “ Jack” wants to forget something while “ Jill” keeps bringing it up. “ Jack may act upon Jill in many ways. He may make her feel guilty for keeping on “ bringing it up.” He may invalidate her experience. This can be done more or less radically. He can indicate merely that it is unimportant or trivial, whereas it is important and significant to her. Going further, he can shift the modality of her experience from memory to imagination: “ It’s all in your imagination.” Further still, he can invalidate the content: “ It never happened that way.” Finally, he can invalidate not only the significance, modality, and content, but her very capacity to remember at all, and make her feel guilty for doing so into the bargain.” (31)

One of the major tools of maintaining the social order is to write the histories in such a way that the reality of the past is altered in such a way as to ignore important historical influences and events. When the past is presented to people, often there can be a willful attempt to hide certain facts and exaggerate others. For example, rightwing historian Paul Johnson spends 2 pages in *Modern Times* talking about the civil rights legislation of the 1950s and 1960s without mentioning Martin Luther King or the NAACP and then concludes by stating that: “ the turning point was the night of 10 May 1962, in Birmingham, Alabama. There was a black riot, with police forced onto the defensive and white shops demolished: ‘ Let the whole fucking city burn,’ shouted a mob leader.” (645) Even though the civil rights movement saw many turning points throughout the 1960s including the March on

Washington, Johnson purposefully depicts American blacks as people ungrateful for the civil rights bestowed upon them by the Kennedy administration (Martin Luther King is not mentioned) to the point where they riot.

By that same token, cultural myths about gender are purposefully created in order to maintain gender roles. In the first wave of feminism, essentialism was used as a reason for equality because women were “naturally” more caring, mothering, sensitive, etc. Women who stepped outside this role were not seen and ignored. Even though this served in helping women to secure the right to vote, the essentialism created a social setting in which women were discouraged from working save in times like World War II when most of the available male workers were in Europe. Women were mothers first and foremost. Women who went into the job field faced sexual harassment, the glass ceiling and limited roles. Even today, women are expected to choose between careers and families as if a career will ruin their families.

Joanna Russ challenges traditional essentialist views of women and women’s “natural roles” by presenting four different female characters from vastly different worlds who are placed in sharp contrast to each other. When the women meet they must confront their previously unexplored biases. In the opening chapter, her utopian character, Janet, has a full resume that would normally be a masculine biography: “I was born on a farm on Whileaway. When I was five I was sent to a school on South Continent (like everybody else) and when I turned twelve I rejoined my family. My mother’s name was Eva, my other mother’s name Alicia; I am Janet Evason. When I was thirteen I stalked and killed a wolf, alone, on North Continent above the forty-eighth

parallel, using only a rifle. I made a travois for the head and paws, then abandoned the head, and finally got home with one paw, proof enough (I thought). I've worked in the mines, on the radio network, on a milk farm, a vegetable farm, and for six weeks as a librarian after I broke my leg. At thirty I bore Yuriko Janetson." (2)

The other characters of the book come from different worlds where their experiences have created their personalities. In the nature vs. nurture debate, Russ falls squarely on the side of nurture. In the plot of the book, Janet is a woman from a planet in which there are no men. They have all died 800 years in the past. She suddenly arrives in Jeannine's world and then in Joanna's world. In this world, Janet serves as a guide to what male-female relations could be (especially in her uncompromising dismissal of sexual harassment) while Joanna's world is a prototypical 1970s America where women were expected to take harassment and Joanna is shocked by Janet's behavior.

Several other examples of gendered relations are explored as the four women change worlds and meet each other. Jeannine feels incomplete without a man and gets married for social stability. Joanna calls herself a female man in order to rid herself of gender expectations. In the future world where Jael reveals that she's gathering the women to fight gender roles, there is a long war happening between men and women. Jael actually kills a man and tries to convince the other three women to go back to their worlds and fight gender roles. One of the most interesting things concerning Jael is that her name is that of a Biblical heroine who killed a man by driving a tent stake through his head in a reverse rape scene. That particular story ends

with a song celebrating Jael and speaking about the man's mother being worried and her handmaids comforting her by saying that he's probably out raping Israelite women. Where Janet is a wish-fulfillment of what gender roles can be for women, Jael acts as a warning as to what could happen if the gender roles remain in place without the intellectual challenge represented by the book.

In many ways, Janet is the hope to move beyond gender due to the fact that she comes from a place without men and therefore no gender. Jael is what happens when gender becomes so deterministic that people maintain their gender roles at the expense of sense, intelligence or life.

Works Cited

Laing, RD. *The Politics of Experience*. London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1967.

Russ, Joanna. *The Female Man*. New York: Bantam, 1973.