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**“THE GENIE MUST REMAIN IN THE BOTTLE”:  
LOCATING THE TRADITION OF “TRUE”  
WOMANHOOD IN COLONIAL AND EARLY  
NATIONAL AMERICAN FICTION**

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to locate the concept of “True” womanhood in Colonial and Early National American Fiction. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had confined the concept of womanhood in various ways. So, locating the forces behind this concept can help us gain a true insight into its evolution in present-day America. The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman was judged by society, could be divided into four fundamental virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Also, the integration of women into the American body politics was just as reluctant as its social counterpart. Ideas ran parallel and often built upon English and French Enlightenment political theory. This undermined image of women is widely detected in the various literary genres of the period. Women writers have been systematically excluded from the canon of American literature. For reasons related to the size and scope of this paper, focus will be on the genre of fiction as a representative area in which women were neglected as competitors to men writers. Notably, the dilemmas and stereotypes of womanhood seem to overlap repeatedly, irrespective, in many cases, of cultural contexts. This is an issue which requires and deserves further probing. And our Arab context is arguably a priority.

**Key Terms:** American womanhood – Stereotyping - Fundamental virtues - Body politics - Fiction

## ملخص البحث:

تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية تحديد موقع مفهوم الأنوثة “الحقيقية” في روايات عصر الإستعمار ومرحلة ما قبل القومية الأمريكية. فقد حصر القرنان الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر مفهوم الأنوثة بطرق مختلفة. لذا، فإن تحديد القوى الكامنة وراء هذا المفهوم يمكن أن يساعدنا في الحصول على نظرة ثاقبة حقيقية لتطوره في الولايات المتحدة اليوم. ويمكن تقسيم سمات الأنوثة الحقيقية، التي يحكم المجتمع بها على المرأة، إلى أربع فضائل أساسية: التقوى، والطهارة، والخضوع، والمكوث بالمنزل. أيضًا، كان دمج النساء في أوجه السياسات الأمريكية المختلفة بطيئًا مثل نظيراتها الاجتماعية. سارت الأفكار بشكل متوازي وغالبًا ما بنيت على نظرية التنوير السياسية الإنجليزية والفرنسية. وقد تم الكشف عن هذه الصورة المهينة للمرأة على نطاق واسع في الأنواع الأدبية المختلفة لتلك الفترة، وتم استبعاد الكاتبات بشكل ممنهج من المنتج الأدبي الأمريكي. ولأسباب تتعلق بحجم ونطاق هذه الورقة البحثية، سيكون التركيز على الرواية كنوع أدبي تم من خلاله إهمال المرأة كمنافس للكتاب من الذكور. وجدير بالذكر هنا أن المعضلات والصور النمطية للأنوثة تتداخل بشكل متكرر، بغض النظر في كثير من الحالات، عن السياقات الثقافية حيث يأتي سياقنا العربي هنا في الأولوية، وهذه قضية تستحق المزيد من البحث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأنوثة الأمريكية – القوالب النمطية – الفضائل الأساسية – الأنماط السياسية – الرواية

## Introduction

The place of the American woman in society, and politics has come a long way from the restrictive role which a tradition of American womanhood has allocated to women, exemplified in the various literary genres, especially fiction. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had confined the concept of womanhood in various ways that locating the forces behind this concept can help us gain a true insight into its evolution in present-day America. Socially speaking, the status of women from the middle of the eighteenth right through the nineteenth century, as recorded in women magazines and religious literature of that period<sup>1</sup>, was that of a genuine demand on the part of males that women uphold the values of *True Womanhood*.<sup>2</sup> Such a demand that women conform to a strict set of religious and social

1 See, for example, the gift books cited in Ralph Thompson, *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, 1825 – 1865 (New York: Wilson 1939; rpt. 1997) deposited in the Library of Congress; religious tracts and sermons in the American Unitarian Society and the Galatea Collection of the Boston Public Library; novels by women as cited in Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947) and H. R. Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789 – 1860* (Durham, N. C. University of North Carolina Press, 1940).

2 Barbara Welter aptly used the word “True” to express the multilayered patriarchal definition of “womanhood” at the time, with the obvious rejectionist contemporary feminist definition of the word, verging on the sarcastic. Welter notes that authors addressing the subject of women at that period used this

values contrasts to the turmoil of that period, especially that of the nineteenth century. Men were immersed in a materialistic society, spending long hours at work. The religious values of predecessors were neglected in practice if not in intent. The chosen land was simply turning into an enormous bank. But during such social and economic mobility, one imposing value remained the same – a true woman was a true woman wherever she was found. No one dared to tamper with the virtues of *True Womanhood* – for he or she would immediately be damned as an enemy of God and the Republic.

As Welter notes, “The attributes of *True Womanhood* by which a woman was judged by society, could be divided into four fundamental virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (152). With them, she was ensured salvation. Without them, no matter whether there was achievement or wealth, all was unforgiven. Mother, daughter, sister, wife all necessitated a conformity with such virtues.

Religious piety comes at the centre of a woman’s virtues and the source of her strength. It came first on the list of eligible bachelors looking for a suitable match.<sup>3</sup> Religion, as was construed, came naturally to women as a gift from God. This “peculiar susceptibility” to religion was bestowed upon her for a reason: “The vestal flame of piety, lighted up by Heaven in the breast of woman” would throw its beams into the impious world of men (Bailey 168). She was looked upon as another Eve, working with Christ to redeem the world of men through her suffering, for “God increased the cares and sorrows of woman, that she might be sooner constrained to accept the terms of salvation” (*Woman As She Was* 206). Dr. Charles Meigs remarked to a class of medical students on why women were naturally religious, that “hers is a pious mind. Her confiding nature leads her more readily than men to accept the proffered grace of the gospel” (13). Caleb Atwater, Esq., witting in *The Ladies’ Repository*, saw the hand of God in female piety: “Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence” (1: 12). And Mrs. John Sanford, whose opinion of her sex was often filled with doubts, agreed enthusiastically: “Religion is just what woman needs. Without it she is ever restless or unhappy” (41-42).

Religion was clearly valued because it did not take a woman from her home. Unlike participation in other activities, church work would not make her less domestic, but rather uphold her *True Womanhood*. Mrs. S.L. Dagg was aptly expressive of such a notion: “As no sensible woman will suffer her intellectual pursuits to clash with her domestic duties,” she should focus on religious work “which promotes these very duties” (*Second Annual Report* 26). Joseph M’D. Mathews also notes that “female education should be preeminently religious” (50). Religion was, in consequence, vital to women just as irreligion was very much inexcusable. Women were warned against intellectual pursuits because such endeavours simply take them away from God. Sarah Hale spoke against those who throw away the “One True Book” for others simply because “the greater the intellectual force, the greater and more fatal the errors into which women fall who wander from the Rock of Salvation, Christ the Saviour.... (665, 669). In any case, “woman never looks lovelier than in her reverence for religion” and conversely, “female irreligion is the most revolting feature in human character” (*Female Irreligion* III: 112).

Purity to a young woman was no less important than piety. Deprived of it, she was a “fallen woman,” or a “fallen angel” unworthy of the company of her sex. “Death” was

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phrase frequently without feeling the necessity to define the term. They simply assumed that readers would intuitively understand what they meant. Frequently, however, what people take for granted in one era is revealing to the student from another. The analysis, here, of the ideal woman is actually an examination of what people and writers meant when they confidently used the phrase: *True Womanhood* (151).

3 As in “The Bachelor’s Dream,” *The Lady’s Gift: Souvenir for All Seasons*. Anonymous (Nashua, N. H.: David P. King, 1849; rpt. 1996), p. 37.

simply “preferable to loss of Innocence” (Hooper 5). A woman’s virginity can only be forfeited on her marriage night, which is the single great event of her life. From that time on, she would be completely dependent on her husband; an empty vessel<sup>4</sup> without any legal existence of her own.<sup>5</sup> A *True Woman*, in this respect, is advised to protect her virtue at all costs. She must uphold her purity against the sensual assaults of men. Thomas Branagan admitted that man is prone to sin, but woman, stronger and purer, must not give in and let man “take liberties incompatible with her delicacy (277).” “If you do,” Branagan admonished his female reader, “you will be left in silent sadness to bewail your credulity, imbecility, duplicity, and premature prostitution (278).” Eliza Farrar, in *The Young Lady's Friend* gave, in consequence, practical advice to girls:

Sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let not your eagerness to see anything induce you to place your head close to another person’s (293 & Lavender 3).

A woman demonstrated her superiority over a man if she managed to withstand his assaults over her virtue. Farrar trying to prove this female superiority, concluded that “the purity of woman is the everlasting barrier against which the tides of man’s sensual nature surge (*Woman and Her Era* 95).” Men, on the other hand, were advised to count themselves grateful when women saved them from themselves. William Alcott, guiding young men in their relationship with the opposite sex, remarks:

Nothing is better calculated to preserve a young man from contamination of low pleasures and pursuits than frequent intercourse with the more refined and virtuous of the other sex. [Youth should] observe and learn to admire that purity and ignorance of evil, which is the characteristic of well-educated young ladies, and which, when we are near them, raises us above those sordid and sensual considerations which hold such sway over men in their intercourse with each other (231).

Women themselves accepted this priceless virtue. Tolles’ remark is apt enough: “Purity is the highest beauty — the true pole-star which is to guide humanity aright in its long, varied, and perilous voyage” (205).

In this respect, the entire country could boast that her daughters were innocent. In a poem on the “American Girl,” the author wrote proudly:

Her eye of light is the diamond bright,  
Her innocence the pearl,  
And these are ever the bridal gems  
That are worn by the American Girl.

(“American Girl” 283)<sup>6</sup>

A masculine summary of this purity and innocence is expressed in poems like “Female Charms:”

I would have her as pure as the snow on the mount –  
As true as the smile that to infamy’s given–

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4 See, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Boston: Ticknor Reed and Fields, 1852; rpt. 2004), p. 71, in which Zenobia says: “How can she be happy, after discovering that fate has assigned her but one single event, which she must contrive to make the substance of her whole life? A man has his choice of innumerable events.”

5 Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946; rpt. 1976) elaborates on this point. According to common law, a woman had no legal existence once she was married and, therefore, could not manage property or sue in court.

6 Welter notes that the American girl whose innocence was often connected with ignorance, was the prototype in modern times of the Henry James heroine especially in his novel, “Daisy Miller.” Daisy Miller saw innocence as leading to tragedy (158).

As pure as the wave of the crystalline fount,  
 Yet as warm in the heart as the sunlight of heaven.  
 With a mind cultivated, not boastingly wise,  
 I could gaze on such beauty, with exquisite bliss;  
 With her heart on her lips and her soul on her eyes—  
 What more could I wish in dear woman than this.

(S. R.R. 52)

But if woman must preserve her virtue until marriage; marriage was, therefore, an end to innocence and a beginning of a more liberal attitude towards life. Yet again, she was counseled not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept a continued submission to her husband. Submission was a feminine virtue expected of women. Men were the worldly, the movers, the doers. Women were the domestic, the passive, the submissive. In *The Ladies' Companion*, a young wife was quoted by Lucy Madox approvingly as saying that she did not think woman should “feel and act for herself” because “when, next to God, her husband is not the tribunal to which her heart and intellect appeals – the golden bowl of affection is broken” (147). Women were warned not to meddle with this quality because it jeopardizes the order of the Universe.

*The Young Lady's Book* summarized the necessity of the passive virtues of women in their lives:

It is, however, certain, that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her (28).

Woman understood her position. “She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector,” declared George Burnap (47). This is put even more forcibly by Mrs. Sandford: “A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support (15).” If forced to work, she was to work in silence, only for pure affection and without thought for money or ambition. A poem, “Woman and Fame,” by Felicia Hemans, concludes with a vehement renunciation of the gift of fame:

Away! To me, a woman, bring  
 Sweet flowers from affection springs.

(16)

Intellectually, woman was expected to be submissive to man. “True feminine genius,” remarked Grace Greenwood (Sara Jane Clarke) “is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood” (311). She advised literary ladies in an apt literary style: “Don’t trample on the flowers while longing for the stars” (311). A woman submerging her talent for the service of her husband was an emblem of *True Womanhood*. Ann Flaxman, a promising artist of the time, was praised because she “devoted herself to sustain her husband’s genius and aid him in his arduous career (“The Sculptor’s Assistant” 263).

A bride is expected to be submissive to her husband right from the beginning of a marriage. Clarissa Packard’s advice in *Recollections of a Housekeeper* is worth quoting: “Oh, young and lovely bride, watch well the first moments when your will conflicts with his to whom God and society have given the control. Reverence his wishes even when you do not his opinions” (122). Packard’s perfect wife in *Recollections of a Southern Matron* realizes that “the three golden threads with which domestic happiness is woven” are “to repress a harsh answer, to confess a fault, and to stop in the midst of self-defense, in gentle submission (256).”

A wife should also occupy herself “only with domestic affairs – wait till your husband confides to you those of a high importance – and do not give your advice until he asks for it,” advised Pickney in *The Lady's Token* (119). Her manners should be that expected of a woman

who had “no arms other than gentleness” and so “if he is abusive, never retort” (Pickney 119). As mother and wife, it was required of women to submit to fortune:

To bear the evils and sorrows which may be appointed us, with a patient mind, should be the continual effort of our sex.... It seems indeed to be expected of us; since the passive and enduring virtues are more immediately within our province.... The hardest [trial] was to bear the loss of children with submission. (Sigourney 199)<sup>7</sup>

A woman, in consequence, accepted submission willingly and unquestionably. Godey’s *Lady’s Book* affirms: “The lesson of submission is forced upon woman. To suffer and to be silent under suffering seems the great command she has to obey (110).”

The *True Woman’s* place was unquestionably at home – as daughter, sister, but especially as wife and mother. Domesticity, therefore, was among the virtues most prized for women. In “Domestic and Social Claims on Women,” S.E. Farley noted that “the true dignity and beauty of the female character seem to consist in a right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties (21).” The home is a safe haven for women as Mrs. Sandford notes: “There is composure at home, there is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind (173).” From her secure place at home, a woman was bound to keep the moral and religious principles of her household intact. T.S. Arthur, in *The Lady at Home*, concluded that “even if we cannot reform the world in a moment, we can begin the work by reforming ourselves and our households – It is woman’s mission. Let her not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms, but begin at home (177-78).”

Home was expected to be the cheerful, comfortable place in which brothers, husbands and sons would remain instead of searching for entertainment outside, and it is the woman’s role to provide this comfort and cheerfulness. This image of woman as comforter was prevalent, as obvious, in the following titles: “Woman, Man’s Best Friend,” “Woman, the Greatest Social Benefit,” “Woman, a Being to Come Home To,” “The Wife: Source of Comfort and the Spring of Joy.”<sup>8</sup> An important role for her was that of a nurse. Sickly children, illness of youths, and aging husbands provided women with the sufficient nursing experience. Patience, mercy, and gentleness were all housewife traits that suited the role of nurse. In a piece of heavy-handed humour, “A Tender Wife,” a man confessed that some women were happy when their husbands were ill that they might have the joy of nursing him to recovery; “thus gratifying their medical vanity and their love of power by making him more dependent upon them (28).”

Housework was looked upon as uplifting, not monotonous or boring. Mrs. Sigourney extolled its virtues: “The science of housekeeping affords exercise for the judgment and energy, ready recollection, and patient self-possession, that are the characteristics of a superior mind (*Letters to mothers* 27).” The matter went so far that in “Learning vs. Housewifery,” the two were complementary, not opposed. Chemistry could be utilized in cooking, geometry in dividing cloth, and phrenology in discovering talent in children (*Letters to Young Ladies* 95).

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7 In the diaries and letters of women who lived during the mid-nineteenth century, the death of a child was the hardest misfortune to bear. This often-occasioned anguish and rebellion on the part of women as well as eventual submission.

8 These titles come from: *The Young Ladies’ Oasis: or Gems of Prose and Poetry*, ed. N. L. Ferguson (Lowell, N.J.: Nathaniel L. Dayton, 1851; rpt. 1995), pp. 14, 16; Anonymous, *The Genteel School Reader* (Philadelphia: T. R. Marvin; 1849; rpt. 2000), p. 271; and *Magnolia*, Vol. I (1842), p. 4.

To protect her domesticity, a woman was advised against addiction to literature, especially the novel which was a vogue at the time. She should avoid reading novels because they interfered with her piety and domestic responsibilities. But if it was necessary, she should choose edifying ones from lists of morally acceptable authors (Waterston 101). A Book was generally regarded as ruinous to a woman. Seduction Stories were always regarded as dangerous books. The stereotypical story of the time depicts the man without honour as providing the innocent maiden with such books as a prelude to his assault on her virtue.<sup>9</sup>

The education of women also gave rise to the debate of whether a “finished” education detracted from their role as housewives. Again, the outcome was conclusive: a woman’s education was never “finished” until she was instructed in the domestic principles of homemaking. Helen Irving, writing on “Literary Women,” made it clear that a lady’s muse should not be that of poetry, but of household chores: “If the necessities of her position require these duties at her hands, she will perform the nonetheless cheerfully, that she knows herself capable of higher things” (93). Ann Stephens advised literary women not to sacrifice their domestic duty: “As for genius, make it a domestic plant. Let its roots strike deep in your house....”(89).

There prevailed the assumption that a marriage is jeopardized because the wife was not *versed* in domestic knowledge. Harriet Beecher Stowe used this theme in a story, “The Only Daughter” in which the pampered wife learns the facts of domestic life from her mother-in-law. Mrs. Hamilton tells Caroline to work on her cooking in the kitchen and reserves the stiff words for her son:

You are her husband—her guide—her protector— now see what you can do. Give her credit for every effort: treat her faults with tenderness; encourage and praise whenever you can, and depend upon it, you will see another woman in her. (122)

Hence, domestic tranquility has been restored and the young wife moralizes: “Bring up a girl to feel that she has a responsible part to bear in promoting the happiness of the family and you make a reflecting being of her at once, and remove that lightness and frivolity of character which makes her shrink from graver studies” (122). In short, domestic responsibilities always precede education. The average woman is to be “the presiding genius of love” in the home, where she is to “give a correct and elevated literary taste to her children, and to assume that influential station that she ought to possess as the companion of an educated man” (*Annual Catalogue* 19).

Such advice was directed to woman as wife. Domestic virtues were best exercised in Marriage. George Burnap saw marriage as “that sphere for which woman was originally intended, and to which she is so exactly fitted to adorn and bless, as the wife, the mistress of a home, the solace, the aid, and the counselor of that *one*, for whose sake alone the world is of any consequence (64).” Samuel Miller preached a sermon on women with a similar intent:

How interesting and important are the duties devolved on females as *wives* ... the counselor and friend of the husband; who makes it her daily study to lighten his cares, to soothe his sorrows; and to augment his joy; who, like a guardian angel, watches over his interests, warns him against dangers, comforts him under trials, and by her pious, assiduous, and attractive deportment, constantly endeavors to render him more virtuous, more useful, more honorable and more happy. (13-14)

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9 For example, “The Fatalist,” *Godey’s*, Vol. IV (Jan. 1834), in which Somers Dudley has Catherine reading these dangerous books until life becomes “a bewildered dream.... O passion, what a shocking perverter of reason thou art! (10).”

Marriage, thus, was seen as giving women more authority. Burnap, thus, concluded that marriage improves the character of the female “not only because it puts her under the best possible tuition, that of the affections, and affords scope to her active energies, but because it gives her higher aims, and a more dignified position (102).”

A corollary to marriage was motherhood. It fixed her ever more firmly to the home. “My friend,” wrote Mrs. Sigourney, “if in becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness, you have also taken a higher place in the scale of being.... You have gained an increase of power” (*Letters to Mothers* 9). The Rev. N. J. Danforth pleaded in *The Ladies’ Casket*: “Oh mother, acquit thyself well in thy humble sphere, for thou mayst affect the world (85).” A *True Woman* naturally loved her children. To suggest otherwise was incomprehensible.

But it is true that throughout the nineteenth century, forces were at work which called upon women to change and play a more positive role in society. Social reform, Industrialism and the Civil War called forth responses from women different from those she was accustomed to. Moreover, women generally felt that they did not conform to the ideal of *True Womanhood*. Some challenged the standard while others tried to enlarge the scope of this label.<sup>10</sup> But the stereotype of what a woman was and ought to be largely persisted simply because of the continuing preaching that a stable order of society depended upon maintaining her place in it. As to the concept of “Women’s Rights” which was often proclaimed by reformers, this generally meant one thing for the *True Woman*:

The right to love whom others scorn,  
The right to comfort and to mourn,  
The right to shed new joy on earth,  
The right to feel the soul’s high worth....  
Such women’s rights, and God will bless  
And crown their champions with success.  
(Little 113)

The integration of women into the American body politics was just as reluctant as its social counterpart. Ideas ran parallel and often built upon English and French Enlightenment political theory. A reading of Enlightenment texts in France, England and the colonies reveals that the relationship between women and the state were largely unexamined. Montesquieu contemplated the nature of society. Rousseau formulated a scheme for the revitalized education of children and Lord Kames wrote four volumes on the history of mankind. Such vast generalizations about humanity has permitted the conclusion that they meant to include all people, both men and women, in their observations. Yet simultaneously, Rousseau contemplated the idea whether women were capable of serious reasoning and whether they recognized themselves as responsible beings. Simply speaking, is it possible for women to be enlightened? Such a question has its implications for women’s intellectual and political history from the eighteenth century onward.

To begin with, it is noticeable that the Enlightenment philosopher is often male: Kant, Adam Smith, Lessing, Locke, Rousseau. Female figures like Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstenecraft and Mme Condorcet drifted on the margins offering minor contributions. They were consumers, not creators of Enlightenment ideas. The use of *man*, therefore, in Enlightenment texts was in fact literal, not generic. There was hardly anything of substance mentioned about the function and responsibilities of women in the politics of the monarchies. There was hardly any serious consideration of women as political beings.

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10 Women reformers were prone to use domestic images, i.e. “sweep Uncle Sam’s kitchen clean,” and “tidy up our country’s house.”

An investigation into the role of women in the political order as perceived by the philosopher's vision is quite revealing. Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*, for example, are a direct attack on Richard Filmer's *Patriarcha* which condone absolute divine male monarchy out of the biblical obligation "to honour thy father" (62-65). But the commandment is, after all, to "honour thy father *and mother*" (my italics). Filmer, in this respect, created a power structure that was masculine and absolute. Locke, however, denounced this analogy between parental power and royal authority. His achievement was the integration of women into social theory. "Conjugal society," wrote Locke "is made by a voluntary compact between men and women(77-78)." The dominion made to Adam in Genesis, as Filmer would agree to, over people in general and Eve in particular; is to human beings over animals. The curse of Eve, Locke thought, could not justify women's submission to men. Adam shared in the sin and he too was punished. Thus, the domination of husbands over wives is a reality which could be changed by human intention.

In defining a political role for women, Locke underlines their domestic rights: mothers have a right to the respect of their children; have responsibilities towards these children and ought to control their own property (30-47). But soon Locke resorts to generalizations, once Filmer had been disposed of, by diminishing the role of women in the social and political order. Women had no clear mechanism for expressing their own will. Locke obviously assumed that women contributed in some way to the civic culture, but he was not very clear as to how this was to be conducted.

In the same manner, Montesquieu returned to first principles: "I have first of all considered mankind (1xvii-1xix)." The principles by which government is regulated are abstractions devoid of gender. But the status of women depends on which type government defines their place in society:

The slavery of women is perfectly conformable to the genius of a despotic government, which delights in treating all with severity.... In a government which requires, above all things, that a particular regard be paid to its tranquility, it is absolutely necessary to shut up the women. [However,] in a republic, where the condition of citizens is moderate, equal, mild and agreeable ... an empire over women cannot ... be so well exerted. (255-56)<sup>11</sup>

As Krause notes, "although women did not play, for Montesquieu, a central role in shaping the civic character of the government under which they lived, the form which that government took had its impact on their private lives (24). Montesquieu saw women better off living in a republic, but he offered no mechanism as to how a woman not living in a republic might change her condition.

Condorcet came closest to justifying the inclusion of women in politics. His feminist comments appear in his essay "Sur l'admission des Femmes au Droit de Cité," and in his "Lettres d'un Bourgeois de New-Heaven" [Haven] (an apt typographical error).<sup>12</sup> He argued that the right to political voice in a republic is claimed by men on the grounds that they are

11 Book VII includes a curious pair of paragraphs headed "Of Female Administration" which offer the paradox that "it is contrary to reason that women should reign in families ... but not that they should govern an empire." In families, women's natural weakness "does not permit them to have the pre-eminence;" but in governments that same weakness means that they administer their governments with "more lenity and moderation." Despite Montesquieu's defense of women's political ability, he suggests no devices to promote the use of these abilities.

12 The essay, "Sur L'admission des Femmes," originally appeared July 3, 1790, in the *Journal de la Société de 1789*; it is reprinted in *Oeuvres de Condorcet* (Paris: Firmin Doidot Frères, (1847), Vol. X, 119 – 30. The letters were published as pages 267 – 71 in Vol. I of Filippo Mazzei, *Recherches Historiques et Politiques Sur les États – Unis . . . avec Quatre Lettres d'un Bourgeois de New-Heaven sur L'unité de la Législation* (Paris: A. Colle, 1788).

“sensible beings, capable of reason, having moral ideas;” qualities which can be equally claimed by women. Men, he remarks, have used their power to make laws that establish “a great inequality between the sexes” (Lettres 269). He concluded with a powerful statement on the political rights of women:

Perhaps you will find this discussion too long; but think that it is about the rights of half of human beings, rights forgotten by all the legislators; that it is not useless even for the liberty of men to indicate the means of destroying the single objection which could be made to republics, and to make between them and states which are not free, a real difference. (Lettres 271)

Condorcet suggests in *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des Progrès de L'esprit humain* (*Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*) that the origin of government resided in the meetings of primitive men who planned hunting trips and wars. It seemed obvious to him that “the weakness of the females, which exempted them from the distant chase, and from war, the usual subjects for debate, excluded them alike from these consultations (24).” Women were, thus, excluded from “the first political institutions” and consigned to “a sort of slavery.” This slavery is modified in the second, or pastoral epoch, and manners are eventually “softened” in the third epoch (24). But Condorcet generally falls into traditionalism, assuming that men represent the general case and women the rare exception. As Rousseau explained in *Emilius*, they lived in another world. Theirs is “the empire of softness, of address, of complacency; her commands are caresses; her menaces are tears (III: 10).” The implication is that if women have moral and physical relationships to men, they do not have political ones. It is only men, literally speaking, whom Rousseau expects to display disinterested civic spirit. It is evident, therefore, for Rousseau that it is “the good son, the good father, the good husband, that constitute the good citizen (10).”

Rousseau was substantial on notions related to the submissiveness of women. His remarks on women often take the form of blunt generalizations: “To oblige us, to do us service, to gain our love and esteem, ... these are the duties of the sex at all times, and what they ought to learn from their infancy” (74-75). He sees the relationship between men and women as sexual and somewhat uncontrollable: “Woman is framed particularly for the delight and pleasure of man.... [Her modesty masks her] unbounded desires (5-6).” Her life, therefore, is directed by necessity: pregnancy, nursing and child-rearing. This makes woman closer to nature and, consequently, in less need to reform her education (229).<sup>13</sup>

The idea that women should not be part of the political community was reinforced by Rousseau’s insistence that women who seek to do so deny their sexual identity. A woman who seeks to be a politician does a grave injustice to her own character:

A witty [i.e., articulate] woman is a scourge to her husband, to her children, to her friends, her servants, and to all the world. Elated by the sublimity of her

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13 In *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937; rpt. 1991), Book V, ch. 1, part II, article I, pp. 720, 734, Adam Smith expresses admiration for the practical aspects of women’s education:

There are no public institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education. They are taught what their parents or guardians judge it necessary or useful for them to learn; and they are taught nothing else. Every part of their education tends evidently to some useful purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, and to economy; to render them both likely to become the mistresses of a family, and to behave properly when they have become such. In every part of her life, a woman feels some conveniency or advantage from every part of her education. It seldom happens that a man, in any part of his life, derives any conveniency or advantage from some of the most laborious and troublesome part of his education.

genius, she scorns to stoop to the duties of a woman, and is sure to commence a man.... (104 – 105)

Rousseau was sure his readers would share his scorn of “a female genius, scribbling of verses in her toilette, and surrounded by pamphlets.” “The art of thinking is not foreign to women,” Rousseau conceded, “but they ought only to skim the surface of abstruse sciences” (139). The attack on masculine, articulate women is a prevalent theme in English and American literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The image would prove a serious obstacle to feminists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is difficult to assess the impact of Rousseau on American thought. His *Emilius* was only available in translation. Locke’s *Two treatises* were even less known. But more widely circulated was Lord Kames’ *Sketch of the History of Man* which shares similar disparaging ideas on women as Rousseau’s *Emilius*. For Lord Kames, the history of women was “a capital branch of the history of man” (II: 2). He openly denied that women have a direct responsibility to their nations. Their relationship to their country is indirect, and they, therefore, have “less patriotism than men” (5). Like Rousseau, he feared masculine traits: “Remove a female out of her proper sphere, and it is easy to convert her into a male” (85). Her education is totally unnecessary because she is fit only as wife and mother. His final remark was harsh: “Cultivation of the female mind is not of great importance in a republic, where men pass little of their time with women” (97).

It is obvious that Enlightenment thought offered no guidance as to the relationship of women to liberty or civic virtue. For Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kames, women existed only in their roles as mothers and wives. American political theorists of the time were largely concerned with issues of opposition to crown policy. They hardly gave explicit attention to basic questions about women. They were aware of the work of Edwin Burrows and Michael Wallace, for example, who focused their ideological concern for parent-child relationships on the specific case of sons and fathers, or the limits of the obligations of sons to mothers (167 – 306). John Trenchard addressed only the evils of marrying women for money (201-12). His *Cato* contemplates political man, narrowly defined. Even a feminist like Catherine Macaulay did not feel the need to discuss women in her histories or address their responsibilities to political society. But her direct comments speak of the private responsibilities of women – even reformed women – to individual men.<sup>14</sup>

It is likely that Americans ignored the integration into political theory of a relationship between women and the body politic simply because they were imitating the British. However, James Otis was one of the few to try in *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*: “Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature?” (Rpt. Bailyn - I: 419). His sister, the voiced Mercy Otis Warren, criticized men for their private treatment of women, but she avoided theoretical questions like: “What responsibility does the state have to women? and what responsibility do women have to the state? The closest she came was to describe the political woman as observer and commentator, not participant. If the ideas were valid, she remarked, “I think it very immaterial if they flow from a female lip in the soft whispers of private friendship or are thundered in the Senate in the bolder language of the other sex” (np). Warren’s comments supported the notion that the family circle is a woman’s state.

14 Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London: C. Dilly, 1790; rpt. 1993); *An Address to the people of England, Ireland and Scotland, on the Present Crisis of Affairs*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: W. Abbatt, 1775; rpt. 1925); *Observations on the Reflections of Edmund Burke*. (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1791); *Loose Remarks on Certain Positions to be Found in Mr. Hobbes* (London: T. Davies, 1767; rpt. 1996).

It was left to post-revolutionary ideology in America to justify a political role for women, accomplishing what English and French Enlightenment philosophers had not. But Americans did not move directly to the definition of women as citizens and voters. The only reference to women in the *Federalist* is to the dangers to the safety of the state posed by the private intrigues of courtesans and mistresses (Earle 28 – 29). But in 1801, Lucy Maddox notes that a pamphlet appeared that contemplated the integration of women into the political community. It was signed anonymously: “The Female Advocate,” and derided the arrogance of those who would deride “masculine women:”

If by the word “masculine” be meant a person of reading and letters, a person of science and information, one who can properly answer a question, without fear and trembling, or one who is capable of doing business, with a suitable command over self, this I believe to be a glory to the one sex, equally with the other.... Custom, which is not infallible, has gradually introduced the habits of seeing an imaginary impropriety, that all science, all public utility, all superiority, all that is intellectually great and astonishing, should be engrossed exclusively by the male half of mankind. (*The Female Advocate* 22)

The Female Advocate wished to function primarily as a citizen and secondarily as a subject. She attacked the rejection to include women in issues related to church and public governance: “Men engross all the emoluments, offices, honors and merits of church and state” (10). The proper model for females, she thought, was a woman named Deborah whose religious and secular activities were commendable:

Behold her wielding the sword with one hand, and the pen of wisdom with the other: her sitting at the council board, and there, by her superior talents, conducting the arduous affairs of military enterprise! Say now, shall woman be forever destined solely to the distaff and the needle, and never expand an idea beyond the walls of her house? (11)

Other Americans made demands for the direct participation of women in public affairs. Charles Brockden Brown sneered at the “charming system of equality and independence” that denied women a part in the choice of their governors (32-33). George Tucker also conceded that laws neither respected nor favoured females (II: 145-445). But direct political participation and influence require voting and office-holding; a solution which American intellectuals shrank from. Instead of insisting that competence has no sex, an alternate model was proposed in the late eighteenth century which contained many traditional elements of the woman’s role.

The theorists of this alternate position were Judith Sargent Murray, Susannah Rowson and Benjamin Rush.<sup>15</sup> They argued that political independence in the nation necessitates self-reliance on the part of women. The model republican woman should have a responsibility to the political scene, though not to act on it. As one fictional woman put it:

If the community flourishes and enjoys health and freedom, shall we not share in the happy effect? If it be oppressed and disturbed, shall we not endure our proportion of evil? Why then should the love of our country be a masculine passion only? (Foster 62)

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15 See especially Judith Sargent Murray, *The Gleaner* (Boston: I. Thomas, 1798; rpt. 2001), III, 188– 224, 260–65; Benjamin Rush, “Thoughts Upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners and Government in the United States of America” (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1787; rpt. 1998), reprinted in Frederick Rudolph, ed. *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Susannah Rowson, *Reuben and Rachel* (Boston: Hanning and Loring, 1798; rpt. 1999).

But the competence of women did not extend to the making of political decision. Her political task was accomplished within the confines of her family. The model republican woman was basically a mother.

In this respect, the life of a Republican Mother was dedicated to the service of civic virtue: educating her sons and correcting her husband's lapses. As one speaker put it in the *New York Magazine*: "Liberty is never sure, 'till Virtue reigns triumphant.... While you [women] thus keep our country virtuous, you maintain its independence" ("Liberty": 301). To that end, the theorists created a mother who had a political purpose and argued that her domestic behaviour had a direct political function in the republic.

This undermined image of women is widely detected in the various literary genres of the period. Women writers have been systematically excluded from the canon of American literature. For reasons related to the size and scope of this paper, focus will be on the genre of fiction as a representative area in which women were neglected as competitors to men writers. As far back as the eighteenth century, theories controlling the reading of American literature have posed one single message: there have been almost no major women writers in America; the major novelists have all been men. And it is surprising that as late as 1977, the canon of American literature hardly included any women novelists of significance. Yet, the critic who goes beyond what is accepted, and tries to look at the literary production in America promptly discovers that women authors have been active since the earliest days of settlement. "Commercially," as Nina Baym notes, "they probably dominated American literature since the middle of the nineteenth century" (56). As far back as 1854, Nathaniel Hawthorne complained to his publisher about the "damn'd mob of scribbling women" whose writings—he fondly imagined—were diverting the public from his own (Porte iv).

Statistics help to make this dominance clear. In the years between 1774 and 1799, a total of thirty-eight original works of fiction were published in the U.S. Nine of these, appearing anonymously, have not yet been attributed to any author. The remaining twenty-nine are the work of eighteen individuals, of whom four are women (Wright 36). It seems implausible, therefore, for the critic of American literature to leave these books and authors out of the picture. Three possible explanations for the critical invisibility of the many active women authors in America can be offered. The first is simple bias. The critic does not like the idea of women as writers and, hence, excludes them.

A second possibility is that, in fact, women have not written the kind of work that can be labeled "excellent," for reasons that relate to their gender. This is a serious possibility. For example, a dense texture of classical allusion was required in all works that were called *excellent*. However, the restriction of a formal classical education to men would have the effect of restricting authorship of *excellent* literature to men. Women would not have written *excellent* literature because social conditions hindered them.

There are, finally, gender-related restrictions that do not arise out of cultural realities contemporary with the writing woman, but out of later critical theories. These theories may follow naturally from cultural realities pertinent to their own time, yet they impose their concerns on an earlier period. If one accepts current theories of American literature, one accepts, therefore, a literature that is essentially male.

To elaborate, American literary criticism has assumed that literature produced in the U.S. would have to be completely original. Therefore, it could not be evaluated by past achievements. The earliest American literary critics began to discuss the "most American" work rather than the "best" work because *the best* was determined only by comparing American to British writing. Such criticism resonated as unpatriotic. The political shackles of England had been discarded and it would not do to be servile in literature. Of course, the idea of "Americanness" is even more vulnerable to subjectivity than the idea of *the best*. When

they speak of “most American,” critics seldom mean the statistically most representative or most typical. The recurrence of the term “America” or “American” in works of literary criticism treating several authors indicates that the critic has chosen his authors on the basis of the extent of how much they conform to his idea of what constitutes the truly American.

As a result, Marius Bewley explains in *The Eccentric Design* that “for the American artist there was no social surface responsive to his touch. The scene was crude, even beyond successful satire, (15)” but later, in a concluding chapter titled “The Americanness of the American Novel,” he agrees that “this ‘tradition’ ... has no room for the so-called realists and naturalists” (291). F. O. Matthiessen explains that “the one common denominator of my ... writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (ix). The *Literary History of the United States* proclaims in its “address to the reader” that American literary history “will be a history of the books of the great and the near-great writers in a literature which is most revealing when studied as a by-product of American experience.” (Spiller et al. xix)

Critics have generally agreed upon certain aspects of “Americanness.” First, America as a nation must be the ultimate subject of the work. As Nina Baym notes, “the author must be writing about aspects of experience and character that are American only, setting Americans off from other people and the country from other nations. The author must be writing his story specifically to display these aspects and to derive from them some generalizations and conclusions about the American experience” (59). Such content seems to exclude, at one extreme, topics about universals; aspects of experience common to people in a variety of times and places – mortality, love, childhood, family, betrayal, and loss.

But at the other extreme, the call for an overview of America means that detailed portrayals of some aspect of American life are also peculiarly inappropriate, as Baym quotes: stories of wealthy New Yorkers; of immigrants and southern rustics. Jay B. Hubbell’s remark is quite revealing in this context:

In both my teaching and my research, I had a special interest in literature as a reflection of American life and thought. This circumstance may explain in part why I found it difficult to appreciate the merits of the expatriates and why I was slow in doing justice to some of the New Critics. I was repelled by the sordid subject matter found in some of the novels written by Dreiser, Dos Passes, Faulkner, and some others. (335 – 36)

Richard Poirier notes that “the books which in my view constitute a distinctive American tradition . . . resist within their pages forces of environment that otherwise dominate the world,” and he distinguishes this kind from “the fiction of Mrs. Wharton, Dreiser, or Howells” (5).

But to exclude many groups might not mean to necessarily exclude women. “In fact,” Baym elaborates “nineteenth-century women authors were overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and Anglo-Saxon in origin. But the presence of these women and their works is acknowledged in literary theory and history as an impediment and an obstacle” (62). Thus, in his significant book of 1960, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler describes women authors as creators of the “flagrantly bad best-seller” against which “our best fictionists”—all male—have had to struggle for “their integrity and their livelihoods” (43). Thus, “the certainty here that stories by women could not contain the essence of American culture means that the matter of American experience is inherently male. And this makes it highly unlikely that American women could write fiction encompassing such experience” (Baym 53).

As such, women were discarded into the lower part of the creative scale. They simply became the object rather than the subject of novel writing. In Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet letter*,

for example, the novel's protagonist has been admitted into the canon, but only by virtue of critical revisions of the text that remove Hester Prynne from the center of the novel and make her subsidiary to Arthur Dimmesdale. So, Leslie Fiedler comments thus of *The Scarlet Letter*:

It is certainly true, in terms of the plot, that Chillingworth drives the minister toward confession and penance, while Hester would have lured him to evasion and flight. But this means, for all of Hawthorne's equivocations, that the eternal feminine does not draw us on toward grace, rather that the woman promises only madness and damnation . . . [Hester] is the female temptress of Puritan mythology, but also, though sullied, the secular Madonna of sentimental Protestantism. (236)

Baym notes that "in the rhetorical 'us' Fiedler presumes that all readers are men, that the novel is an act of communication among and about males. His characterization of Hester as a myth or image makes it impossible for the novel to be in any way about Hester as a human being. Giving the novel a gender reference, Fiedler makes it inaccessible to women and limits its reference to men in comparison to the issues that Hawthorne was treating in the story "64". To probe another aspect, it has been observed that the role of the beckoning wilderness, the attractive landscape, is given a deeply feminine quality. "Landscape" Baym continues, "is usually imbued with female qualities, as society is; but where society is menacing and destructive, landscape is compliant and supportive. It has the attributes simultaneously of a docile bride and a non-threatening mother; its female qualities are articulated with respect to a male vision" (64).

Nature, of course, has been feminine and maternal from the start, and Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* picks up a timeless archetype in its title. The gender implications of a female landscape, by the way, have already started to be studied. Annette Kolodny has studied the traditional canon from this approach. She theorizes that the hero, fleeing a society that has been imagined as feminine, imposes on nature some ideas of women which "expose fantasies that are infantile, concerned with power, mastery, and total gratification: the all-nurturing mother, the all-passive bride. Whether one accepts all the Freudian or Jungian implications of her argument, one cannot deny the way in which heroes of American myth turn to nature as sweetheart, anticipating the satisfaction of all desires through her and including among these the desires for mastery and power" (121).

Even in comparatively recent years, the idea of creation as a male province remains intact as evidenced in a 1979 book titled, *Home as Found* by Eric Sundquist. "The author," Baym notes, "takes the idea that in writing a novel the artist is really writing a narrative about himself and proposes this addition" (64):

Writing a narrative about oneself may represent an extremity of Oedipal usurpation or identification, a bizarre act of self-fathering. . . . American authors have been particularly obsessed with *fathering* a tradition of their own, with becoming their "own sires." . . . The struggle . . . is central to the crisis of representation, and hence of style, that allows American authors to find in their own fantasies those of a nation and to make of those fantasies a compelling and instructive literature. (Xviii – xix)

The point for our purpose, here, is the simplistic replacement of the verb "to author" by the verb "to father," with the profound gender-restrictions of that translation unacknowledged. Certainly, this idea involves the question of authority, and "authority" is a notion related to that of "the author." And there is some gender-specific significance involved, here, since authority in most cultures tends to be invested in adult males. But the theory raises a limitation in literary creation to a form of therapeutic act that can only be performed by males.

It is ironic, therefore, that just at the time that feminist critics are discovering more and more significant women, critical theorists have seized upon an assumption that allows these women less and less presence. In pursuit of the uniquely American, they have arrived at a place where “Americanness” has delved into the depths of the male psyche.

#### IV

To conclude, the social, and political constraints of “true” *American Womanhood* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a burden which American feminism is struggling to set straight to this day, and which were vehemently reflected in the fiction of the age. As revealed, the demands for a stereotype of womanhood which would satisfy the vanity of males were tremendous. But one cannot, in any case, exclude women thinkers of the time from sharing in the fossilization of such an image. Many voiced similar ideas which restricted the concept of womanhood to domesticated motherhood irrelevant to the world of manhood. Was it short-sightedness on their part or a self-willed desire to retreat into an apathetic state of mind which relieved them of the responsibility to share in ruling the world? It seems to be neither. Ideas concerning the meaning and function of womanhood were so that women simply conformed, unaware in many cases that they were being gradually subdued into the image that males have fostered over the ages. Dissident female voices have certainly had their share in trying to reverse such an image. But they were far too few to topple a mighty archetype. It took nearly two centuries to set the record straight though remnants of the past continue to menace the vanguards of the liberation of womanhood.

But in the end, there remains the query: should we contextualize the problems of “true” *American Womanhood* within a particular cultural framework (social, political, literary, etc.), in other words, should we investigate these problems with respect to the cultural/historical place and time in which they occurred? This seems to be the trend so far. Or should we decontextualize such problems; to look at the wider picture; to see whether there are common parameters which can help locate and solve these problems, especially in locations like our Arab world? After all, the dilemmas and stereotypes of womanhood seem to overlap repeatedly, irrespective, in many cases, of cultural contexts. This is an issue which requires and deserves further probing. And our Arab context is arguably a priority.

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