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The Female Eunuch, by Germaine Greer



Greer wrote this novel in 1971 during the second wave of feminism. This wave of feminism protested mostly for a rethinking of female sexuality, the family cell, inequalities within the workplace and reproductive rights for women.

Summary of Main Ideas:

The Female Eunuch starts by describing and defining the female body in its natural un-gendered state. The second part of the novel is about the female soul. It explains and analyses the conception of the female stereotype and the process of socializing girls into stereotypical women by the deflection of their natural energy. The third part of the novel discusses the idea of love; it defines and breaks down the stereotype of

male and female desire and proposes an alternate definition of what constitutes a family. The novel's fourth aspect is about violence against women which is perpetuated by both men and women. Greer depicts the social illnesses, such as rape and incest, as caused by a subtle yet strong hatred towards women. This part of the book also focuses on the internalized self-loathing of women. She ends her novel with the benefits of an organized rebellion and revolution to liberate men and women from the negative self-loathing patterns they are pushed into under patriarchy.

Links to course content:

This novel is a protest novel against Patriarchal rule. By simply writing a book whose sole goal is to destroy gender stereotypes Greer is breaking the silence imposed on women when they are relegated to the private sphere. She exposes women's muted culture, writes soothingly about the female body, proposes anti-patriarchal family structures and recovers feminist history.

Greer writes about menstruating and tries to demystify its process and perception. She explains how girls receive and perceive their first menses. She does this in an accurate, open and logical way: "In fact no little girl who finds herself bleeding from an organ she didn't know she had until it began to incommode her feels that nature is a triumph of design and that whatever it is, is right. When she discovers that the pain attending this horror is in some way her *fault*, the result of improper adaptation to the female role, she really feels like the victim of a bad joke"(Greer 57). By describing how a girl experiences her first menstruations Greer is sharing knowledge about the muted culture of women. Another example of how Greer exposes the muted culture of women is by acknowledging schoolgirls'

passions for one another as being a result of their previously over-protected conditioning: “Those little girls who wrote passionate love-letters to each other [...] had no conscious understanding of their own passionate and amorphous feelings. Because of the taboos on their expression of these intense feelings, they became miserably agitated, [...]” (93). By writing about and analyzing the taboo against schoolgirls’ love and attraction to each other, Greer’s defies in every possible way the “angel in the house” by exposing this aspect of women’s muted culture.

By devoting a whole section of her novel to the description of the un-gendered female body, Greer writes the female body in a positive light. Throughout her book, she exposes and breaks down the numerous negative stereotypes and preconceptions that surround the female womb, genitalia and sexual drive. By doing so Greer refuses to be complicit in the silencing of women, which is similar to Denise Levertov in her poem “Hypocrite Women”. The most striking moment in the description of the female genitalia is in her reference to Samuel Collins, a 17th century doctor: “Early gynaecology [...] like Samuel Collins, described the vagina so lovingly that any woman who read his words would have been greatly cheered.[...] he speaks of the vagina as the Temple of Venus and the mons veneris as Venus’s cushion, but he abandons euphemism to describe the wonders of female erection:” (Greer 45). By referring to a 17th century doctor, Greer recovers female history, soothing women’s description of themselves.

The Female Eunuch proposes a different family structure from the traditional (patriarchal) cell-family. Greer proposes an alternate family formation based on a community of parents, she calls this an organic family system. In this system, children are brought up by the community, without knowing (and ideally not caring) who their biological parents are: “The point of an organic family is to release the

children from the disadvantages of being the extensions of their parents so that they can belong primarily to themselves.” (266) This family system is in direct opposition to the patriarchal system, where patrilineal descent is a necessary component in the restriction of women.

Throughout the book, Greer refers to many texts, essays and novels that are written by women or that promulgate her feminist ideas. Some of these writers are: Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), W.I Thomas (1907), Mary Astell (1721), Robert Briffault (1931) Maria Montessori (1956), Friedrich Engels (1943), Ashley Montague (1954), etc. By referring to these scholars, she recovers women’s knowledge. She also defies the erasure of women within history. Greer also writes back through the mothers’ knowledge when she quotes these scholarly women, thereby breaking the stereotype of men as the ultimate scholars.

Greer’s novel includes many concepts of feminist writing, and provides researched information about the condition of women in society. Although some of her ideas are outdated, like the organic family, and other ideas seem obvious to today’s readers (everyone now knows that menstruating does not prevent women from working), Greer’ book still rings true in its description of the muted culture of women. Many aspects of women’s culture are still kept secret and this book breaks the silence.



Greer

These links will help provide additional information on the people Greer refers to in her book:

Mary Wollstonecraft: <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/wollstonecraft.html>

W.I Thomas: <http://sobek.colorado.edu/SOC/SI/si-thomas-bio.htm>

Mary Astell: <http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/march99/astell4.html>

Robert Briffault: <http://library.mcmaster.ca/archives/findaids/fonds/b/briffaul.htm>

Maria Montessori: <http://www.montessori.edu/maria.html>

Friedrich Engels: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/TUengels.htm>

Ashley Montague: <http://www.answers.com/topic/ashley-montagu>

Samuel Collins: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Collins