Bolat, E. (2021). A challenge against stereotypical perception of gender roles: Deconstruction of gender in Joanna Russ' *the female man*. *International Journal of Language Academy*, 9 (3), 207-214.

Volume 9/3 September 2021

p. 207/214

Article History:

Received

12/08/2021

Accepted

25/08/2021

Available online

19/09/2021

**A CHALLENGE AGAINST STEREOTYPICAL
PERCEPTION OF GENDER ROLES: DECONSTRUCTION
OF GENDER IN JOANNA RUSS' *THE FEMALE MAN***

Eren BOLAT¹

Abstract

Attracting attention with her feminist discourses and works, Russ draws attention to gender discrimination faced by women in her work named *The Female Man* and deconstructs stereotypical gender roles. Creating four different female characters with unique features, Russ becomes a kind of voice for the women who are subjected to diverse negative attitudes due to their sexual orientation in disparate regions of the world. According to Russ, in order to comprehend the concept of gender, women's conditions should be addressed with a broad spectrum rather than focusing solely on patriarchy or race. Russ reconstructs a new thought by deconstructing gender conventions that are prevalent in society, allowing the reader to have a different perspective. With a peculiar standpoint by arousing a sense of wonder in the reader, Russ satirically covers the subjects that she includes in her novel; thus, she departs from the traditional novels and offers new alternatives in the reader's perception of gender. With the distinct atmosphere and approach in her novel, Russ rebels against the sexist notion of her era and the following periods. This article will be an attempt to analyze how Russ deconstructs the perception of stereotypical gender notion and gender roles reflecting her multifaceted notion of gender. Furthermore, in this study, I will try to reflect how Russ creates miscellaneous female characters with divergent features in terms of gender roles.

Keywords: Feminism, gender roles, woman

¹ Lecturer, Hitit University, Department of Foreign Languages, ernbltit@gmail.com, <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8148-522X>

INTRODUCTION

The Female Man is a feminist science fiction including both utopian and dystopian features. American feminist writer, Joanna Russ, who has used literary utopia in a groundbreaking and divergent way compared to the former utopian works, constructs the novel on the basis of feminism. Creating her works especially on the grounds of science fiction and feminism, her satirical approach to gender roles in this work shows how she deserves the label "radical feminist" attributed to her.

The Female Man was published in 1975 although it was completed in 1971 when the resistance against the male dominant society and inequality in America rose up. During the 1960s and 1970s, women started to show reaction against the discrimination between man and woman in the society. They struggled for the equal rights for women, and protested with organized marches and public meetings. Russ was one of these women who spoke out this discrimination in her novels.

In the novel, *The Female Man*, four main characters take place- Joanna, Jeannine, Janet and Jael, who are from disparate parallel universes. All of them have different economic, educational and social backgrounds. It can be clearly inferred from the novel that Joanna, a college professor, is the mouthpiece of Russ in the novel who lives in an Earth-like world. Another character in the novel is Jeannine, a librarian, who has never experienced depression of the destructive issues taking place in the 1960s, such as WWII, Great Depression. Janet, who can presumably be regarded as the main character, lives in a utopian world called Whileaway where a plague destroyed all men, which let women construct a new society including only women. Jael is the fourth character, who is an assassin living in a dystopian world.

By creating four various types of female characters, Russ tries to show that equality is needed for all women without any exception. As Zinn puts forth, her perception can be seen in the second wave feminism in 1960s and 1970s, which claimed "a diversity of feminisms, responsive to different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves" (Zinn, 1999, p. 97). According to Russ, feminism should include all women from different geographies, races and even ethnic backgrounds. This article will be an attempt to analyze how Russ deconstructs the perception of stereotypical gender notion and gender roles reflecting her multifaceted notion of gender. Furthermore, in this study, I will try to reflect how Russ creates miscellaneous female characters with divergent features.

The Concept of Gender

Gender is a notion tied to race and social status, and it is most literally described as the state of being male or female. The term "gender" is used to characterize both femininity and masculinity and is sometimes used interchangeably "with sex." Therefore, the dissimilarity between sex and gender is frequently overlooked. The key distinction between sex and gender is that sex is biological, whereas gender is socially and culturally constructed. As Tyson states, "the word gender refers not to our anatomy, but to our behavior as socially programmed men and women" (Tyson, 2006, p. 92). Some theorists, on the other hand, contend that the two notions are inextricably linked. According to the critic Judith Lorber,

[n]either sex nor gender are pure [separate, autonomous, discrete] categories. Combinations of incongruous genes, genitalia, and hormonal input are ignored in

sex categorization [as male or female], just as combinations of incongruous physiology, identity, sexuality, appearance, and behavior are ignored in the social construction of gender statues [masculine or feminine] (qtd. in Tyson, 2006, p. 112).

For Karren Kinnear, "the social and cultural context in which people live, as well as how they interpret femininity and masculinity, influence gender roles" (Kinnear, 1997, p. 4). The dynamics of communities and cultures impact and shape gender roles, hence, there is no ultimate definition of gender and gender roles. Women's duties are commonly perceived as being responsible for childcare; thus, their proper position is at home. However, people in some American Indian tribes have the option of choosing their duty, which means that women have the chance to do jobs traditionally reserved for men. This situation lends credence to the idea that gender roles are "socially created" rather than "fixed behaviors."

Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist academician, discusses how gender is formed in her masterwork, *The Second Sex*. She underlines that a woman becomes a woman; and during her self-becoming process social features deeply affect her becoming. The position that humans play in society is not determined by biology, psychology, or economics; rather, civilization creates this creature (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 9). Author Marie Richmond-Abbott also points out that "gender roles have come to mean entirely socially created expectations of masculine and feminine behavior and the biological factor of sex is used to construct a social category of gender" (Richmond-Abbott, 1992, pp. 4-5). Men and women divvy up responsibilities and carry out socially mandated roles. Barker's classification corroborates this argument. He says; "men are commonly held to be more 'naturally' domineering, hierarchically oriented and power-hungry, while women are seen as nurturing, child rearing and domestically inclined" (Barker, 2000, p. 231). This male-dominated lifestyle, which manifests itself especially in patriarchal societies, also negatively affects women's becoming. Due to the social pressure that they face and the roles assigned to them, many women do not have the sense of awareness and hence not venture into the process of individual becoming.

Kara similarly discusses the effect of patriarchy on women and relates it to the gender roles in his paper, *Gender (Re)Construction and Destabilization of Patriarchy in Joanna Russ' The Female Man*. The divergent point from Kara's argument is the focused perception towards woman's self-becoming quest with the detailed examples given from *The Female Man*. Although patriarchy plays a major role in women's fight for self-becoming, there are numerous additional issues that restrict women from realizing their potentialities. Racism, sexism, economic disparity, lack of equal employment rights in public institutions, misogyny, and, most crucially, the inability to represent themselves are the primary ones. These problems became intertwined like the wires of a birdcage, forming steel wires that encircled women. In order to talk about a complete freedom for women and to provide them with the living space they deserve, all the negativities against women should be regarded holistically and should not be evaluated independently of each other. When focusing on only one problem, it is very difficult to reach a solution.

Deconstruction of Gender in *The Female Man*

As previously stated, *The Female Man* is a utopian feminist fiction in which the subject of gender is prominently included and practically pervades all aspects of the story. Russ peculiarly pays close attention to how culture constructs gender roles. She attempts to challenge stereotypes about women and their place in society through her novel.

Therefore, she emphasizes the gender-related problems that women experience in her story. She creates a utopian society that perplexes readers. She demonstrates how society generates gender and homogenizes all women:

We are all women. We are tall, within a few inches of each other. Given a responsible variation, we are the same racial type, even the same physical type—no red heads or olive skins, hm? Do not go by me; I am not natural! Look in each other's faces. What you see is essentially the same genotype, modified by age, by circumstances, by education, by diet, by learning, by God knows what (Russ, 1986, p. 161).

Ekler, a critic on the notions of the Self in modernist and post-modernist literary studies, relates the socially imposed roles to Kennedy's protean mode of self and existence which means the fact of having to act in the predetermined roles. He asserts that the social systems perceive the individual acts as a potential threat to the system. Therefore, they have built their structures in such a way to rehabilitate the individual (Ekler, 2020, p.17). Russ similarly draws attention to the fact that women are compressed into stereotypical forms, and as a result, they are unable to see their own particular characteristics and selves. She also emphasizes the idea that all women exist in a certain state of being dependent on men. In the novel, it is pointed out that if women do not create their own identity, they will be steered by gender roles that are deemed appropriate for them. Joanna's self-depiction obviously shows how the male-dominated society subordinates women:

dress for The Man
smile for The Man
talk wittily to The Man
sympathize with The Man
flatter The Man
understand The Man
defer to The Man
entertain The Man
keep The Man
live for The Man. (Russ, 1986, p.29)

From this startling detail, we see that the male figure is at the center of women's lives, and women lead a life in a satellite-like relationship with him. What Russ criticizes here is actually the subaltern position reserved for women. The most acceptable position allocated to women is "subaltern" and "submissive" female roles, despite the fact that they share the same world as males. The most important component in the construction of such a notion is the fact that gender roles, which determine the dynamics of society, are constructed against women.

As a dominating power in society, patriarchy prevents women from revealing their true identities. Kılıç points out that patriarchal systems define femininity as passivity and obedience, as femininity has been regarded as "not activity or women's inclusion in manly attributes" (Kılıç, 2021, p. 163). Therefore, Russ expressly mentions patriarchy, which is a major cause of the women's oppression in several societies. The strong effect of patriarchal thought can be seen in the dialogue between Laura and her mother. Laura's mother tells her daughter how it is important to sustain her life by depending on man. It is much easier and better living dependent on men.

When I was five I said, "I am not a girl, I am a genius, "but that does not work, possibly because other people do not honor the resolve. Last year I finally gave up and told my mother I did not want to be a girl but she said Oh no, being a girl is wonderful. Why? Because you can wear pretty clothes and you do not have to do anything; the men will do it for you. She said that instead of conquering Everest, I could conquer the conqueror of Everest and while he had to go climb the mountain; I could stay home in lazy comfort listening to the radio and eating chocolates (Russ, 1986, p. 65).

Incorporating various subjects like patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles, Russ also challenges the perception of "normal" created by the society by addressing issues that are unconventional and even taboo in traditional communities. She continues to puzzle the reader and breaks their stable thoughts on gender and sex with the relation between Laura and Janet. Russ asserts that enjoying your body is a natural part of being a woman, and no one can restrict it unless you want it. For Russ, a nonconventional intercourse is something that is not abnormal because the normality and abnormality are also constructed by the society. She means; women are not obligated to accept society's norms to be "normal". Russ demonstrates how society puts pressure on women's sentiments of pleasure and creates the "normal" for the individuals. With Laura's opinions, Russ reflects society's general perspective on the concepts of normal and abnormal.

I've never slept with a girl. I couldn't. I wouldn't want to. That's abnormal and I'm not, although you cannot be normal unless you do what you want and you cannot be normal unless you love men. To do what I wanted would be normal, unless what I wanted was abnormal, in which case it would be abnormal to please myself and normal to do what I didn't want to do, which isn't normal. (Russ, 1986, p. 68)

While Russ questions the norms and accepted stereotypes created by the society, she also addresses the problems that women face because of their gender. One of the key points raised by Russ is that women are not treated equally in the workplace and are not given the same opportunity compared with the men. Russ also takes a hard line on the issue of unequal work allocation and salaries, which has been widely attacked by feminists, particularly as the feminist movement has grown stronger. Women have a harder time finding job than men because of this problem, which is exacerbated by a male-dominated society that views women as inferior and weak. Despite working under the same conditions, women are paid less when they find work. One of the key causes of this predicament is men's perception of women as insufficient and incapable of working as efficiently as males. With the party scene in the novel, Russ effectively depicts men's attitudes towards women who desire to work.

You women are lucky you don't have to go out and go to work. [...] Do you think women can compete with men?" [...] the male speaker answers his own question: "You cannot challenge men in their own fields," he said. "Unequal pay is a disgrace. But you've got to remember, Janet, that women have certain physical limitations," [...] "and you have to work within your physical limitations" (Russ, 1986, pp. 43-44).

Another discussion on working women is held between a man and his wife. The man interrogates why his wife works since he believes that there is no need for women to work. He utters: "the cost of a baby-sitter and nursery school, a higher tax bracket, and

her box lunches from her pay, it actually costs us Money for her to work. She cannot make money. Only he can make money" (Russ, 1986, pp. 117-18). Because of these factors, the man believes that his wife's work is useless, and she should therefore stop working. The dialogue between the woman and her husband demonstrates how tightly gender norms are constructed and how tough it is to break them. The man thinks it would be more beneficial for his wife to stay at home and take care of her child. He upholds the premise that his wife's earnings are only enough to cover the expenses of the child. The fact that women are paid less than males is the fundamental cause for the man's attitude. Women work in harder conditions and face more challenges than men, yet they are not paid as well. The inequality and disparity between men and women's working conditions are the major problems for the women. Russ stresses that women are not granted decent jobs because of their female identity. The dialogue between Joanna and Jeannine shows this condition.

"Jeannine, you'll never get a good job," I said. "There aren't any now. And if there were, they'd never give them to a woman, let alone a grown up baby like you. Do you think you could hold down a really good job, even if you could get one? They're all boring anyway, hard and boring. You don't want to be a dried-up old spinster at forty, but that's what you will be if you go on like this. You're twenty-nine. You're getting old. You ought to marry someone who can take care of you, Jeannine" (Russ, 1986, pp. 113-14).

Apart from the reality that women will have difficulty in getting job, there is another crucial point to be stated in the above-mentioned conversation. This is Joanna's way of bringing attention to the fact that a 29-year-old woman is starting to age, thus, may be late for marriage. Joanna believes that a woman's ideal existence should depend on marrying a man and sustaining her life via him rather than working and standing on her own. This kind of thinking implies that women require the presence of a man in order to exist.

The occupational categories in a male-dominated society are designed regarding only men, which is one of the reasons why women in a patriarchal society are under the influence of men. Russ emphasizes women's minimal role in society, claiming that they are rarely given opportunities to work in society and men dominate many professions. Even the jobs are socially constructed and women have less chance than man to get these kinds of jobs.

It's very upsetting to think that women make up only one-tenth of society, but it's true. For example:
 My doctor is male.
 My lawyer is male.
 My tax-accountant is male.
 The grocery-store owner (on the corner) is male.
 The janitor in my apartment building is male...
 I think most of the people in the world are male (Russ, 1986, p. 204).

With the aforementioned observations, Russ spotlights that men are dominating in social life, particularly in the sharing of jobs among individuals, and women do not take much place in working life. This detail in the novel is truly Russ' cries on behalf of all women, and it is a manifestation of the inequality and marginalization that women are subjected to. Russ deconstructs all the clichés and generalization against women. It can be claimed, based on peculiar statements incorporated in her *The Two of Them*, that "she had turned

from writing love stories about women in which women were losers, and adventure stories about men in which the men were winners, to writing adventure stories about a woman in which the woman won" (Russ, 2005, p. vii). Rather than only resolving women's subaltern and secondary position, Russ also deconstructs the perception of conventional women characters by taking them from the margin to the center.

CONCLUSION

By creating a new style of feminist utopian novel, Russ breaks taboos in the society and confuses the reader. She conceives new untouched questions in the minds of people. To do this, she draws attention to the gender issue. Russ places the female identity at the center of her plot by deconstructing traditional female roles through the different female characters and multiple universes she has constructed. Contrary to a world dominated by patriarchal thought for centuries, in her novel where female identity comes to the fore, Russ is concerned with deconstructing the rigid and stereotypical forms created for women and their female identities. By employing multiple characters throughout the novel, Russ also aims to show that gender and gender roles are not binary. For her, instead of stereotypical roles determined for individual, multiplicity would be better for all. Through her newly created universes in her novel, she questions the gender, and how people perceive it. With different characters, she tries to show how women are oppressed because of their female identities. With its unique narrative form, it can be said that *The Female Man* is a different and new style novel which lets people question the things they have never thought before. It is the voice of women who are oppressed and silenced because of their bodies, physical structures and female identities. By deconstructing gender norms that are common in society, Russ reconstructs a new notion that allows the reader to obtain a different perspective. With the four multiple alternative world models she has created, Russ genuinely implies that human being is no longer at ease until they respect each individual's differences. The fate of any world, in which individual differences (religion, race, gender, ethnicity) are not taken into account, will not be different from a "waste land".

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