
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identity Annihilation in Ann Bradstreet's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

A 'City upon a Hill' has always been the phrase which depicted the ideal and the perfect society the puritans sought to establish in Massachusetts, yet there can be several discrepancies noticed within their social and intellectual life and the way they dealt with the female intellectuals and poets. The current study tackles the way puritan patriarchal society marginalizes female writers and intellectuals, such as Ann Bradstreet, in a way that demolishes their identities. It also aims to depict these female intellectuals as breakers of the social norms in challenging the Puritan spiritual authority and its social system, so their writings were not valuable, and their voices were not heard. More significantly, the study shows how the social/religious conventions created within the puritan were used as a weapon against female writers. Thus, for puritans, the idea of women being writers or poets was not acceptable.

KEYWORDS

Annihilation, Bradstreet, female identity, marginalization, puritanism.

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1. Introduction

New England was actually established due to the need to separate the puritans from the English church in the early sixteenth century. This need was crucial for reforming the beliefs of the puritans and purifying the church according to deep-rooted doctrines and covenants that they made with God. Amongst teachings and the beliefs of the puritans, there emerged several social views and conventions that determined the role of women in the puritan society, and those beliefs were turned into unshakable conventions and rules with which women must abide; however, these conventions are used against women in a way that shaped an unquestionable identity for female. While a man is the agent, a woman is the non-agent; while he is the subject, she is the non-subject. Using a feminist approach, this study examines how the identity of women in general and female writers in particular, such as Bradstreet, was almost annihilated through marginalization and suppression with which they struggled in the puritan society.

The lifestyle of Bradstreet and other female writers didn't allow them to express themselves freely, and their writing was not a menace to speech rights as if they violate the social norms when they write; thus, they are viewed as being 'different'. While the biblical 'Bathsheba' "provided the model for the virtuous housewife", the intellectual experience of some puritan female writers such as Ann Bradstreet and Anne Hutchinson highlights important issues pertaining to women in general and female writers in particular, such as mistreatment, marginalization in the puritan/patriarchal society. It is more than being marginalized; Hutchinson breaks the norms by rejecting and challenging the puritan authority. She accused the minister of "preaching a covenant of works" rather than a covenant of grace (Wikipedia). Hutchinson "challenged the authenticity of civil and religious authority. She was brought to trial, found guiltyand banished from Massachusetts Bay" (Harper Anthology 71). The example of Hutchinson paved the way for creating an annihilated identity for female writers/intellectuals by their male counterparts in a way that excluded them from the canon in later times. It is no accident that law and commerce are both public domains from which women have historically been excluded. Rawlinson (2016) explains that "it is no accident, either, that the philosophers who originated these views of the self typically endorsed this exclusion". These thinkers advocated "confining women to the private domestic sphere where their

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voices could be neutralized and even transformed into virtues, in the role of empathetic, supportive wife, vulnerable sexual partner, and nurturing mother."

Female intellectuals such as Hutchinson and Bradstreet were regarded as breakers of social norms. Instead of taking out the colonial housewife and the responsibility of spinning, weaving and sewing, these two female figures were regarded by the puritans as exemplary of revolutionary upheaval who stood against the authority of the church during the colonial era; thus, it tried to minimize their voice and identity. According to Allison J. Call May (2022) "When women's voices are ignored, they are denied the opportunity for plain expression or proper representation of their own experiences" (15)

At the intellectual level, the first female poet, Ann Bradstreet, whom the society fought. "She evidently knew Sir Walter Raleigh's "History of the World" a study of the ancient kingdom and dynasties emphasizing God's authority through every circle (95)

In "The Prologue", Bradstreet presents an argument in which she shows that her identity as a female poet is almost annihilated. Her argument begins with a kind of self-deprecation; she underestimates her power, her talent, and her "mean pen" (97), meaning that, as a poet/a writer, Bradstreet feels incompetent to write about such great things such as wars, glorious captains and kings; these are great things that deserve someone like "Great Bartas" to write about. Bradstreet feels underestimated in writing about such great historical figures because of the illusion created by her male-dominating society; she feels inferior to other male writers not because she is less talented than them, but rather because of their narrow mindedness that does not accept the idea of a woman being a talented writer. She says, "Let Poets and Historians set these forth/My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth" (The Harper 97)

In the second stanza, one can understand that self-underestimation is combined with envy. Bradstreet feels not only inferior to Bartas, the great French poet but also envious and jealous of the muses of his poetry. For the puritan, a woman is a woman, but a woman can't be a writer or an intellectual.

But when my wond'ring eyes and envious heart
Great Bartas' sugar'd do but read o'er,
Fool, I do grudge the Muses did not part
'Twixt him and me that over-fluent store.
A Bartas can do what a Bartas will
But simple I according to my skill. (ibid)

In order to reflect the inferiority that she was struggling with, Bradstreet expresses her grudge towards the muses who used to inspire Great Bartas. Because of her minimized role in Puritan society, Bradstreet believes that she couldn't produce as great and distinctive poetry as the poetry that was composed by male poets such as Bartas. More significantly, her muse is so foolish, broken and blemished that she can't produce rhetoric; she is turned into a musical instrument whose strings are broken and can't be fixed because of the values/views her society imposes upon her as a woman; she can do nothing to change the way her males' counterparts marginalize her poetry and for them, whatever she writes is unrecognizable; she is better recognized as a woman rather than an author.

From School-boy's tongue, no Rhet'ric we expect,
Nor yet a sweet Consort from broken strings,
Nor perfect beauty where's a main defect.
My foolish, broken, blemished Muse so sings, (ibid)

She goes on to say, "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits." (ibid 98) In saying this, Bradstreet protests against all the prejudices that marginalize her and other female intellectuals. Neither her muses nor her pen helps her to get enough recognition for her gender. As a talented poet, Bradstreet implicitly attacks the gender conflict as well as the unequal treatment of female intellectuals in the Puritan society to which she belongs. Within the same stanza, she says, "If what I do prove well, it won't advance/They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance" (ibid) regardless of her great efforts which she makes as a writer, Bradstreet still feels inferior when compared with her male counterparts; the level of intelligence is different when it comes to the female poets who were seen as less intelligent than males in the puritan society; the pens better fit the latter category, while the former a needle better fits.

The idea of the author's identity being annihilated keeps circulating throughout the poem by emphasizing the weakness of the females. However, the poem ends up with a sense of surrendering to the reality where males occupy a more superior position; thus, it is useless to wage war against her male counterparts. "Men have precedency and still excel/It is but vain unjustly to wage

war." (ibid) In a more desperate tone, Bradstreet confesses her inferiority/weakness as a poet to the extent of having an identity annihilated of her. Addressing her male counterparts, she says, "Men can do best, and Women know it well/ Preeminence in all and each is yours/ Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours"(ibid)

In another poem entitled 'The Author to Her Book', Bradstreet raises implicit questions regarding her identity as a female writer through the metaphor of a 'child'. She compares her poetry book to an "ill-form'd offspring" of her "feeble brain"; she believes that her book is ill-formed or incorrect since her brain is feeble. Using an extended metaphor, Bradstreet addresses her book as though it could reply since she compares it with her baby throughout the poem. However, she is not happy with it. Though it belongs to her, she is still unhappy since some people stole it to be published without her knowledge; they stole it because she was a poor mother who could not take care of it. Thus, it has been "snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true" (99), and then it was published without her permission. She goes on to say:

Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).
At thy return, my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call, (99)

In these lines, Bradstreet indirectly depicts a chaotic situation where her book is taken away from her by friends who are "less wise than true." They took it abroad and exposed it to the public. It seems that someone snatched her book and had it published somewhere. One can feel that Bradstreet's self and identity have really been annihilated, as if having her book published without her knowledge was permitted and legalized by her society. McDonagh (1996) explains that "The nullification of women's selfhood was once explicitly codified in Anglo-European and American law. The legal doctrine of coverture held that a woman's personhood was absorbed into that of her husband when she married."

She adds that her book consists of some errors because they made it "in rags." The personification of the book being in rags and trudge that it is no longer attractive to the readers and still needs to be revised since it has some errors within it;

In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array, 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none (ibid)

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the objective of this paper is to prove that the female identity was almost annihilated in the puritan society through a careful analysis of two of Bradstreet's poems; it is the puritan society that determines the roles of the female intellectuals and imposes its views upon them. Thus, it annihilates their identities and the 'self'; in the puritan society, female writers don't deserve the same power or privileges. Beauvoir explains that "woman is a category imposed by society; women's selves, then, are also in large part imposed on them by society, and women would do well to fashion their own selfhood through claiming their freedom. Yet this freedom is always co-determined in a situation with others". In Butler's view, it is to question the categories of biological sex, gender, and sexuality that serve as markers of personal identity. Sex, gender, and sexuality are at the very "core" of self-identity because self-identity is constructed through modes of power (38)

Women in general and female writers in particular deserve to be marginalized as a punishment for the moral error of Eve. Allison explains that "Divine punishment of Eve's sin in the garden, the weaker sex being weak due to moral error" (16). In his 'Paradise Lost,' Milton depicts Eve's moral sin in the garden, saying: "left to herself, if evil there ensue, She first his weak indulgence will accuse" (IX, 1182–1186 *The Norton Anthology of English*). Unfortunately, some puritan women welcomed the idea of attributing Eve's sin to their nature in accepting to occupy minor positions in the puritan society; some enjoyed living merely as wives, mothers, and acting as farm hands, and others promoted the puritan clergymen and were entirely committed to the puritan theology such as Mary Vere who, as Eales (2022) puts it "was undoubtedly the acceptable face of puritanism"; consequently, there emerged a lot of stereotypical images related to those puritan women who never showed any kind of resistance to the puritan social and religious system and had always been subordinate to men.

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