

Pamela's signifying signs and gestures: A semiotic analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the feminine character of Pamela is explored throughout the epistolary novel. One is concerned with how Pamela's constructed character as a female figure is represented with language and action, rather than adopting a defending position of the suppressed females in the 18th century. Pamela's politeness and indirectness in her letters are aspects of her virtue and femininity. However, her language and use of specific politeness strategies, can also be considered a way of manipulating Mr B. Through her voice, there is a kind of gradual unity of the female and male voices. Pamela is a representative of a doubled voice, exhibiting both of her inner and outer femininity. In this study, Pamela's language is analysed using Julia Kristeva's concept of semiotics.

Keywords: Semiotics, Pamela, sign language, verbal language, femininity

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the language of Pamela and to what extent it is feminine drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of semiotics as interpreting the 'subject' through a series of signs and symbols, and how this relates to the 'gender' theory, as referred to later, of Judith Butler which reconstructs the gendered identity, specifically the feminine.

The main goal of this essay is to highlight the relation between the function of signs and language throughout the novel and the central thematic significance of the implicated feminine position in the 18th century. Thereby, one analyses how Pamela's characterisation successfully leads the reader into a real representation of her world through a process of signifiers and signified with all the specific ideological references. How Pamela's character, with all its signifiers (i.e., body, language, letters), simplifies large scale situations. One also is interested in highlighting, how far Pamela is an icon of liberty for women within a system only regards females as passive figures. It is an investigation of Pamela's character as a subject in a process to reveal ideological references that make this constant polarized reading possible and, at the same time, to ask why there is such a drive to know the truth about Pamela. Since the mission is might, Pamela, consciously or unconsciously, creates what the New Critics believe as basic element in a literary text: complexity, ambiguity, and tension. She proves to have what Lacan calls a structured Unconscious.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The epitome of the social change in 18th and 19 centuries was about class system. Women's position in society was determined by birth and property, in addition, women's situation was governed by her male provider. Being married to a man or a daughter to a father of high social status would dictate the ranking of the woman. Otherwise, marrying to a man beneath her would lose her social status to that of her husband. There were distinctive spheres for both men and women. The public sphere belongs to men while the domestic one to women. However, the accelerated change of the society creates a kind of a revolution among the literary productions. Samuel Richardson's novel examines a radical change in thinking and writing that would turn the values of the 18th century around. It is not only a revolution for being a novel, but also for the whole moral, gender and class system underlining Pamela's letters. These letters show how a teenager grows, changes, and lives every moment and to the moment her growth and change. This is why the "present" and "the present progressive" tenses are a must in her narration. In other terms, Pamela uses language to impose her rhetoric, and she succeeds.

In the feminist critique of language, Cameron (1990) suggests that Richardson's novel Pamela has been considered as echoing the gendered culture. Language could be seen as a carrier of ideas and assumptions which become through their constant re-enactment in discourse a reflection of hidden roles of real experiences of women behind the insistence on their passivity and submission. Thus, gender is not merely reflected but acted out in various instance through the novel. The linguistic gender is deeply rooted in the social inequality between men and women. Many literary texts identify these assumptions of women's passivity in literature of 18th and 19th centuries. Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, Charles Dicken's Estella are amongst the best examples. According to critic Ruth Bernard Yeazell:

In Pamela, Richardson self-consciously set out to rewrite an old story: rather than the familiar tale of a serving girl seduced and abandoned, he would tell of one whose triumphant demonstration of her spiritual worth proved her deserving of marriage. As Mr. B himself says, "Her fine person made me a lover; but it was her mind, that made me a husband." (493)

Janet E. Aikins addresses the use of visual sense by Samuel Richardson. From her essay, one can deduce the effective use of signs in *Pamela*, as the writer Samuel Richardson was creatively using physical objects within his novels. Janet E. Aikins stresses:

Richardson expected his readers to recognize the implications of these aesthetic choices, for all three of his narratives urge us to understand the complex subjectivities of sight, whether figurative or literal. In *Pamela* we witness the imperfect efforts of the heroine to create speaking pictures of the shifting sights around her.

According to Kristeva, language is regarded a 'mark of the workings of drives' (136). These 'drives', in Kristeva's terms, involve the signification of the materiality of the body in the literary text to trace the association between meaning and form. Moreover, these drives aim at relating biology 'the body' with its representation 'the text' which thereby set the difference between 'semiotic' and 'symbolic'. He points out that the semiotic with its 'preoccupation with... the 'signifier'' (137) is associated with the 'body as self' (ibid.).

Otherwise, these semiotics ‘cannot be solely interpreted’ (ibid.). Thus, an association between ‘literature and ... social concord’ (ibid.) has been established. Kristeva affirms that following such an analytic discourse from ‘top to bottom’ (ibid.), there will be realistic novels, such as *Pamela*. In other words, it is an expression of subjectivity, and as Kristeva refers to in relation to the female body, it combines nature and culture. However, it is an attempt to neutralize the feminine, which according to the typical labels, is diminished to nature. Instead, Kristeva’s theory looks for affirming the ‘self’ as a ‘subject in process’ (136).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Pamela: A semiotic reading to the novel

Pamela, according to this theoretical approach seems to relate language with culture, fiction with reality, as the realms of speakers, especially when describing ‘women’ mainly as speaking beings. In this regard, the language of *Pamela* later would reveal much of this argument. Thus, it can be said that assuming such an attitude would allow the feminine to have an adequate communicative language which ‘simultaneously prevents... the [woman] from becoming an object like any other- forbidden’ (ibid.). It will be, therefore, a clear feminine voice which would liberate her through ‘meaning and signification’ (ibid.), as well as ‘questioning process of subject and history’ (137).

This doubled image is focused through the novel as we experience *Pamela* as a self-display of the divided nature, for the inner femininity, not the outer one, the thought and spirit, not only the body and beauty, as this is noted by Tassie Gwilliam (1991) in her view of *Pamela* that she ‘promotes the rejection of the female aristocratic, ornamental body-the female body as spectacle-in favor of the ideal of a woman whose "depths" were more valued than her "surface." (105).

It can also be expressed through the gendered view of the feminist Judith Butler who points out that ‘gender is in no way a stable identity’ (Butler 1988, 519). It is something will be noticed through *Pamela*’s resistance for Mr. B’s trials to rape and seduce her. She displays a new perspective of the female essence through destabilising the feminine passivity. Thus, my way is to figure out the process of such an effort to convert the female image from just a ‘spectacle’ figure to a ‘speaking’ one, and *Pamela*’s letters convey these points of view.

From the very beginning of the novel, *Pamela*’s narrative in an epistolary form, a collection of letters between her and her parents enhances the female’s voice, as a first-person narrator. This style of writing helps *Pamela* to express her thoughts and feelings. As Ian Watt, a critic in the twentieth century, points out in his book ‘*The Rise of the Novel*’ (1957), the crucial element in any novel is to imitate reality. That is, to use the subjectivity of characters to assert the primacy of individual experience in the novel. This brief reference to Watt’s point of view relates directly to my argument about using symbols and signs with all its ideological references in the novel in an attempt to study the female identity and how it is presented. Julia Kristeva’s concept of semiotics and Judith Butler’s theory of performance echo this individual experience.

In the first ten letters, there are examples of using ‘clothing’ which stand as signs and symbols for a relationship between the material and immaterial, between writing and intimacy. When Mr. B demands Pamela to give him the letter which she has secreted in her ‘bosom’, it is not physically category; on the contrary it indicates the part of her dress covering the chest. That is, in the religious reference, it means secrecy and intimacy. It also alludes to the heart as the seat of the emotions. Moreover, it can be said that Pamela wants to distract Mr. B’s attention from her letters to her body, in an attempt to keep them secure and safe as well as her mind from his dominance. She presents her body not to tempt him, but rather to keep her mind and reasoning. This example includes an element of correlation between Pamela’s subjectivity and the material world. It is an occasion which can be translated according to Butler’s terms by:

The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. (521)

Here, the ‘bosom’ usage is an attempt to define this relationship between Pamela’s outer appearance as a ‘female’ and her interiority as an individual with confidence and emotions. It is a significance of ‘the body as surface and the soul or metaphysical self as depths’ (Gwilliam 105). It is true that the development of Pamela’s character is a realistic representation of women in the 18th century, but she is also a model whose ideological identity –as a female- is created within a system of acts and performance. It is not just a given subject, but on the contrary, it is a subject in a process. Butler regards this in her theory, rejecting the gendered identity as ‘fixed’ one, but rather a ‘doing’ one.

Hence, her body and her letters become one part, related to this constructed identity. However, this constructed character, as a female identity is ‘underscored by the presence of oppositions’ (Butler 11). In other words, this construction seems to dramatize the equivalence between the letters ‘writing’ and the body ‘the self’. That is, the presence of Mr. B and his sexual advances highlights the opposite masculine superiority in the novel, at least, through the eyes of Pamela. She recognized his attempts not just as part of his privileges; as a member of the landed gentry who has a duty to protect her and no less than she does to obey him, but also as a reflection of her fear of being tempted. In violating his responsibility to look out for her welfare, he obliges her to violate, in self-defence, her duty to obey him; in repelling his advances, then, she is not only defending her own chastity but also upholding the social order. In other words, whereas Mr. B’s attempts to seduce her can be looked as established on a belief of a masculine superiority over females at that time, Pamela considers this incident as something relates not only to her purity and virtue, but also to the social construction, regarding the conceptual scheme through which we get such definitions for ‘men’ and ‘women’, ‘males’ and ‘females’. Michael McKeon (1985) points out to this concept in his article, ‘Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel’, as a question of ‘virtue’ in relation to ideology in literary context, and how this depends on ‘individual progress’ (157). McKeon, thus, is aware of such conflate in terms of novelistic narration. He claimed that: ‘virtue also in terms of narrative form and content ... [depends on] the way the story is told, and what it is that is told’ (181). It seems that McKeon highlights the importance of narrative to figure out the ‘truth’ and ‘virtue’ in any text. If we apply McKeon’s view on Pamela, we will notice the significance of her narration and how she used it to defend herself from not just

Mr. B, but also the whole society who would judge her not as an independent person but as a typical figure passive voice. Pamela's letter to her parents has a clear reference to her influence:

And pray, said I, walking on, how came I to be his property? What right has he in me, but such as a thief may plead to stolen goods? Why, was ever the like heard? says she. This is downright rebellion, I protest! (Pamela 129) (emphasis added).

This piece of her epistolary affirms her autonomy of self. It is a rich example of this essay discussion. It echoes the relation between the power of narration and nature, as opposing the usual belief in the 18th century about the disconnection between the feminine narration and the necessity of women to be 'artlessness' (Case 659). In other words, how her inner femininity affects her voice, as she realizes that her body is not a property of anyone, as well as her voice. She uses her narrative to defend herself. Pamela translates herself in her writing, she is aware of how she is represented and is thus confirming the right to express herself. Mr. B, however, seems to be attempting to control her writings. Pamela is consciously referred to his intentions in her writing:

I shall never enough acknowledge the value he is pleased to express for my unworthiness, in that he has prevented my wishes, and, unasked, sought the occasion of being reconciled to a good man, who, for my sake, had incurred his displeasure; and whose name he could not, a few days before, permit to pass through my lips! But see the wonderful ways of Providence! The very things that I most dreaded his seeing or knowing, the contents of my papers, have, as I hope, satisfied all his scruples, and been a means to promote my happiness. (Pamela 326)

This passage indicates clearly how Pamela tries to preserve her letters and her mind from Mr. B's attempts to seduce her. It is as if she tries to secure her body from his attempts to seize her. She sees her letters as representative of her mind and thus of her identity. At this point, I would suggest that Pamela's virtuous attitude affects not only the typical image of women as passive figures, but also Mr. B. Certainly, he is a representative of a dominating patriarchal masculine voice in the novel. Yet, this virtue –attached to her letters- is introduced to us through Pamela's narration of her struggle against Mr. B's sexual advances. It seemed as if her feminine subjectivity, represented in her body, which is physically restrained within the walls of the typical religious stereotype of women at that time, converts writing into the very experience of desire. However, the represented desire succeeds not in tempting, but rather in changing Mr B. He is no longer attracted to her feminine beauty, but rather he is willing to discover her mind through her writings. Eventually, her reluctance to meet with his masculine desire inspired by her purpose that she will never "do anything that shall bring [her parents'] grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. [she] will die a thousand deaths, rather than be dishonest any way' (Pamela 7). She is "resolved to be virtuous" (54) and be consistent of her virtue against all Mr B's temptations. Ultimately, his reformation was not that he believed that she means what she says but also feeling a shame of his own deeds.

CONCLUSION

Pamela's representative virtue succeeds in transforming Mr B. to a righteous life and applies the same effect over her growing audience in the novel. It can be said that the medium of her virtue was her letters, her writing, her language. If we note what Pamela is emphasizing, it is the subject authenticity in the form of writing, as one of the main parts in her constructed identity. It seemed that her letters and her identity cannot be dissociated. Her language defeats Mr. B's attempts to seduce her, as characterized by him as 'charming manner of writing, so free, so easy' and full of 'sentiments' (83).

It seemed that Pamela tended to change Mr. B's sarcasm voice at the beginning of the novel, saying: 'This girl is always scribbling' (7) by changing his gaze from the beauty of her body into the beauty of her mind. Her words signify this thematic meaning all through the novel. Her 'pride of birth and fortune' (83), would not allow her neither to obey Mr. B's temptation nor to be overwhelmed by her emotions: '*O how my heart troubled! ... But I said aloud, with my eyes lifted up to heaven, Lead me not into temptation: but deliver me from evil, O my good Go!*' (ibid.). It seemed that the language by which the feminine is described becomes itself transformed through the agency of the female writing subject. This transformation is associated with both the question of gender and the act of narration.

Thus, the thematic significance in this novel represented in Pamela's characterisation as a constructed subject, with all its gender references is highly revealed through the signs and symbols of her language. Using her writing as a tool to demonstrate a clear portrait of how the man 'Mr. B' reclaims his corrupted inner self by means of virtue. It can be said that she performed her virtue through her mind and interactions, so that she was able to penetrate the patriarchal masculinity of Mr. B. William Sale referred to Pamela in his introduction to the novel by the 'new woman' (Pamela xi). This concluded reference asserts this essay's essence that the female subject, as a gender identity, is not a fixed one, but rather it is a constructed one. So, no longer we see Pamela as a passive female, but rather as a confident, speaking subject, who could create an eventual change, result in her happy marriage to Mr. B. Furthermore, Pamela's authenticity is present in Mr. B's confessions of his transformation from a male gaze into a male appreciating her mind and thought:

I, though I doubted not effecting this my last plot, resolved to overcome myself; and, however I might suffer in struggling with my affection for you, to part with you, rather than to betray you under so black a veil. (283)

Finally, it is obvious how Mr. B perceives Pamela as aspect of himself. That is, as an independent subject with an authentic voice to unveil the separation between hegemonic masculinity and passive femininity. The significance here is not that Pamela is the suffering and struggling character, but instead it is the male figure who suffers, struggles and regrets. Thus, in modern sense, Pamela is a balanced attempt to support the female voice with aspects of self-representation of the inner and outer through challenging the concerns required for sustaining with a scheme that so firmly controls and confines women's possibilities. Pamela goes from a victim to a wife.

Her class mobility is unprecedented, and her revolutionary ideologies and character created by Richardson would set a new tone for British novels to come.

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