

Subversion of Conventional Gender Roles in Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*

This research is concerned with the subversion of conventional gender roles in Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780) which represents the major female protagonist's struggle for her identity in the patriarchal society. The play, *The Belle's Stratagem* centers around a story of a beautiful and intelligent woman, Letitia Hardy, who falls in love with a boy named Doricourt whom she has not seen since childhood. In fact, marriage is important for the girls in eighteenth-century England. Letitia attempts to arrange a marriage for herself with Doricourt. He ignores Letitia's advances for marriage. It shows that women are considered as inferior while men are perceived as the superior beings. As so called inferior beings women have been assigned subordinate in the patriarchal society. Letitia tries to bind him in traditional gender norms and moral conduct. It means that Letitia tries to subvert conventional gender role. Letitia always tries to find out an unusual way to search for freedom and individual emancipation.

On the contrary, Miss Ogle, Mrs. Racket, Lady Frances and some other characters blindly follow conventional gender roles. This thesis analyses the conventional gender roles of the eighteenth-century era through feminist views and gender studies. Actually, this play explores the role of Letitia who is trying to quest for her identity and subversion of conventional gender role.

This thesis seeks to study identity and subversion of conventional gender role as being crucial to the construction of *The Belle's Stratagem*. A female protagonist, Letitia, places her in the role of guiding and dictating the courtship. Similarly, girls say matters more than boys. Letitia disguises her identity by wearing a mask and uses her true charm, beauty and intelligence to turn Doricourt's emotions to love and passion. Indeed, Letitia pretends to be dim, amorous, turning Doricourt's emotions

from indifference to disgust. She had to compromise her identity and manipulate a male-dominated system to gain Doricourt's attention. Similarly, this study explores how female protagonist, Letitia, questions and subverts the conventional stereotypical normative cultural values and practices and how she is attributed with masculine traits. However, Letitia subverts the conventional stereotypical normative cultural values and practices by trying to break the patriarchal social construction. Her strategy to win Doricourt's heart shows that there would be her attribution of her masculinity.

With the analysis of *The Belle's Stratagem*, readers will be able to know that feminist theory is equally applicable to the text because a protagonist, Letitia appears to the example of feminism in the play. The origin of the term "Feminism" can be traced out the renaissance period. It is related to gender issues. Feminism is a gender-based movement which happened in the 1960s with a target to reject and subvert all existing traditions favorable to gender ideology. It reveals the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. It is the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. In other words, Gender issue and feminism are interrelated but latter subvert the conventional gender role that has created gender discrimination.

As a result, feminist movement emerged which seeks equal rights and status with men to decide on their careers and life. The patriarchy considers women weaker in every sphere of social life. Men dominate women by position their feet on the background of this biological or physical construction and deep-rooted gender ideology. Feminism cannot get its completeness apart from gender issue. Feminist critics hold gender as their primary matter for discussion. It is obvious that gender is

primarily a social construct where certain roles are assigned to each gender. All feminist writers always try to oppose the cultural construction of gender and the role that culture offers a woman. 'Patriarchy' always exploits the woman on the basis of the gender role.

Talking about the conventional gender role that is imposed on woman, an American feminist critic, Lois Tyson says:

A woman who has internalized those norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined in short, in any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional, weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify such inequalities which still occur today as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision positions. (25)

Tyson clearly says that gender is the construction of the culture. It promotes men as strong, and women as weak in every aspect of their lives. Feminism is a necessary movement to divert the view of society which gives women a subordination position. Women from the beginning of human civilization are being treated with ambivalence and misogyny. Women have to live in the discriminatory male-made culture on the basis of sex, race, age, class etc. Such culture is the main boundary of their experience. Jane Freedman says, "Distinction between the biological sex and social creation of the eternal feminine is a precursor between sex and gender that is common in much feminist theory" (14).

All feminists agree that the entire culture phenomena are dominated by a patriarchal value. Patriarchy plays a role not only in political system but also in literary and philosophical systems. There is a hierarchy made between male and

female where male is the standard and female is subordinate. The woman is made to be subjugated by male. The males are centered and females are marginalized in patriarchal society.

Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work, *The Second Sex* (1949) says,

“One is not born but rather becomes, a woman . . . it is civilization as whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine” (89).

This extract explores gender of course, does not have any relation with human anatomy but is completely a social construct. Therefore, all feminists are concerned with destroying the patriarchal ideology. In the literary text, women are always assigned secondary roles. Traditional philosophies include in themselves in the masculinity idea of man as self or normative and woman as other or deviant feminist critics apply these ideas to the text to challenge the basic masculinity assumption behind them.

In this way different critics have commented the drama from multiple perspectives. Most of them have raised the issue of style and the themes simultaneously. Though, some of them have raised the issue of gender roles and feminism, they have not satisfactorily clarified the identity of the female protagonist. That's why accepting them with high respect, this study explores the identity of the female protagonist in the play. Letitia tries to fight against the patriarchal domination and struggles for self identity. She subverts the traditional stereotypical normative cultural values and practices by pursuing her independent life. While doing so she is stigmatized as *The Belle's Stratagem* in the patriarchal society. Although she is victimized of stigma she keeps on accepting the challenges constructed by male ideology in patriarchal society and faces them in every situation of her life until her

death. However, her effort is undermined by her reliance on male counterparts for her survival and identity.

This drama attempts to show the rejection of traditional patterns of rules and rejection in modern era also. Female struggle is very much to make self identity and their existence in the society. Thus, feminism will be used as the tool of my study. The concept of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Marry Wollstonecraft will take as the theoretical tool to analyze the text as well as there are many critics criticizes this research by applying of feminist theory. The first blow on patriarchal structure was given by Virginia Woolf in popular work *A Room of one's Own* (1929). She believed that women has always faced social and economic obstacle to their literary ambition. She was also very conscious of the imposed limitations of her own education. In this book she explores men's anger to women, misunderstanding between the sexes and above all psychological condition under which women were brought up. M.H. Abrams explains:

An important precursor in feminist criticism was Virginia Woolf, who in addition to her fiction. Wrote *A Room of One's* (1929) and numerous other essays on women authors and on the cultural, economic, and educational disabilities within what she called a 'patriarchal' society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities. (88)

In the feminist world, a radical criticism mood was depicted by Simon de Beauvoir's with her book entitled *The Second Sex* (1949). Through this book, Beauvoir established the principle of modern feminism. Abraham says:

A much more radical critical mode was launched in France by Simon de Beauvoir's *The second sex*, a wide – ranging critique of the cultural

identification of women as merely the negative object, or “other” to man as the dominating “Subject” who is assumed to represent humanity in general; the book also dealt with “the great collective myths” of women in the works of many male writers. (Abrams 88)

Simon de Beauvoir, an existentialist feminist critic and writer of France, strongly opposes the tendency of viewing women as ‘Second Sex’. She believes that existence always precedes essence. She objects to men’s attitude of discriminating between sexes as ‘subject’ and ‘object’ men being the former and when the latter, she argues that “men define the human, not women. Woman is riveted into a lopsided relation with man, he is the one, she is the other” (quoted in Selden 135). According to her, all the male writers assume the female as negative. She emphasizes that women perceive man as self (subject) and themselves as other. The woman is inessential in the eyes of men who want to accept her as “other”. She vociferously refutes the notion of female essence prior to individual existence and attacks the patriarchal myths of women.

The primary objective of study is to bring feminist discourse of resistance in conversation with the hegemonic representation of women in dramatic discourse. In the same manner, gender theory opposes these feminists who believe that only women’s writings can be feminists’ writings. Feminist criticism, as an analyst of gender, opens the textual field in discourse. Gender theory, unlike traditional feminism brings men as theorists, critics and scholars into feminists’ criticism from margin to the center into literary analysis. Cora Kaplan has given emphasis on Phallus and explained:

The phallus as a signifier has a central, crucial position in language for if language embodies the patriarchal law of the culture; its basic meanings refer

to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are required. (256)

The main focus of English feminist is to show that women are self sufficient in them. Their effort is to help the women to be free from the patriarchal boundary. Feminists write for freedom, autonomy and selfhood of the women. Accepting such realities, some male writers began to write giving the autonomous power to women characters in their literary writing. Women protagonists have individuality in their text. Consciousness and awareness that make female as equal human being is somehow the contribution of feminist movements. Feminists view that only a feminist struggle will particularly change the relation between man and woman that concerns issues such as sexuality, violence, gender discrimination, emancipation and equality for women.

In this research, there are several critics have viewed from different perspective by analyzing the concept of feministic bend even in the gender studies. David Glover and Cora Kaplan, in their book, *Genders (The New Critical Idiom)*, 2000 they explain that

Gender is now one of the busiest, most restless terms that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning. As these brief examples show gender is a much contested concept as slippery as it is indispensable but a site of unease rather than of agreement. If gender is used to mark the differences between men and women, portmanteau word like gender-bending call those differences in to question, drawing attention to the artificiality of what we think of as 'natural' behavior.(1)

In this extract, David Glover and Cora Kaplan define about the gender issues. It shows that gender is changeable and has different nature because the gender role of women who were confined to household duties in the past is changing at present. It explores the subversion of conventional gender roles. Thus, the characteristics, roles and assumptions associated socially with men and women are known gender. In the society, the role of women might have been viewed inferiorly and the role of men might have been viewed with high priority.

Thus, Cowley also tries to subvert this kind of conventional concept of gender roles through her writings. The concept of gender can be changed by technology, culture, economy, war, crisis, obligation, time and development of activities. Gender is constructed through the process of socialization.

Gender Studies is a field of interdisciplinary study which analyzes the phenomenon of gender. Gender Studies is sometimes related to studies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and location. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (7). In Gender Studies, the term "gender" is used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not to the state of being male or female in its entirety.

The field emerged from a number of different areas: the sociology of the 1950s and later, the theories of the psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan, and the work of feminists such as Judith Butler. Each field came to regard "gender" as a practice, sometimes referred to as something that is performative. Feminist theory of psychoanalysis, articulated mainly by Julia Kristeva and Bracha Ettinger and informed both by Freud, Lacan and the Object relations theory, is very influential in Gender Studies. The view that gender is performativity sought to show what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited

through the gendered stylization of the body. In other words, it shows what we take to be an internal feature of ourselves that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. Butler elaborates this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, says:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender anthologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (33)

For Butler gender roles is the construction of culture. It regards men as strong, women as weak in every aspect of life. Butler's notion of drag as a subversive tactic and "this perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identity that suggests openness to revivification and parody proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claims to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (176).

Butler argues that the recitation of heterosexual constructs in non heterosexual frames can bring to light the constructed status of the heterosexual. Cowley does not follow the heterosexual norms of marriage and kinship. She reminds us that while we continue to change the world, we remain deeply tied by desire and the need for recognition to the world as it is. Thus, gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, societies and cultures. The gender roles are not biologically predetermined rather are the locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity. They can change over time and vary within culture.

Deploying Foucault's argument from *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Butler claims that any attempt at censorship, legal or otherwise, necessarily propagates the very language it seeks to forbid. As Foucault argues, for example, "the strict sexual mores of 19th century Western Europe did nothing but amplify the discourse of sexuality it sought to control" (18). Extending this argument using Derrida and Lacan, Butler claims that censorship is primitive to language, and that the linguistic "I" is a mere effect of an originary censorship. In this way, Butler questions the possibility of any genuinely oppositional discourse; "If speech depends upon censorship, then the principle that one might seek to oppose is at once the formative principle of oppositional speech" (3). Butler also questions the efficacy of censorship on the grounds that hate speech is context-dependent. Citing J.L. Austin's concept of the performative utterance, Butler notes that words' ability to "do things" makes hate speech possible but also at the same time dependent on its specific embodied context.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler develops an ethics based on the dullness of the subject to itself, the limits of self-knowledge. Borrowing from Adorno, Foucault, Nietzsche, Laplanche, Cavarero and Levinas, among others, Butler develops:

a theory of the formation of the subject as a relation to the social – a community of others and their norms – which is beyond the control of the subject it forms, as precisely the very condition of that subject's formation, the resources by which the subject becomes recognizably human, a grammatical "I", in the first place. The subject is therefore dispossessed of itself by another or others as the very condition of its being at all, and this process by which I become myself only in relation to others and therefore cannot own myself completely, this constitutive

dispossession, is the opacity of the contemporary subject to itself, what I cannot know, possess, and master consciously about myself. (32)

The subject is focused in order to reflect on individual identity in relationship with the normative society that has paved a path for the people to go along. Butler turns to the ethical question: If my narrative account of myself is necessarily incomplete, breaking down tellingly at the point precisely when "I" am called to elucidate the foundations of this "I", my genesis and ontology, what kind of ethical agent, or "I", am "I"? Butler accepts the claim that if the subject is opaque to itself the limitations of its free ethical responsibility and obligations are due to the limits of narrative, presuppositions of language and projection. "You may think that I am in fact telling a story about the prehistory of the subject, one that I have been arguing cannot be told. There are two responses to this objection" (1).

There is no final or adequate narrative reconstruction of the prehistory of the speaking "I" does not mean we cannot narrate it; it only means that at the moment when we narrate we become speculative philosophers or fiction writers. This prehistory has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self.

On the contrary, that "prehistory interrupts the story I have to give of myself, makes every account of myself partial and failed, and constitutes, in a way, my failure to be fully accountable for my actions, my final "irresponsibility," one for which I may be forgiven only because I could not do otherwise (78). Instead she argues for an ethics based precisely on the limits of self-knowledge as the limits of responsibility itself.

The main objective of feminism has been to revolt against the patriarchal gender social construction. Thus, feminism is found in the Cowley's writings. This research creates some problems about gender bias between male and female. Conventionally, the gender socialization going on development in different culture, gender relationship, interaction, discrimination and the analysis about object, the condition of female in eighteenth century. In this research, the major male protagonist, Doricourt's indifference about his marriage with his beloved, Letitia reflects that gender discrimination. It shows the main problem of this research.

The issues for rights of women had been raised by some male writers as well as women writers earlier. Although numerous female comedic playwrights were raising question against patriarchy some of the outstanding feminist playwrights of eighteenth century are Mary Pix, Susanna Centlivre, Elizabeth Griffith and other twentieth-century feminist writers are Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Mary Wollstonecraft also advocate the women's rights. In addition, the feminist discourse has provided chances to understand the text.

Many critics have analyzed this drama as one of the feminist's issues and gender studies. Hannah Cowley's *The Bell's Stratagem* (1780) is diversely interpreted by various critics from the very outset of its publication. Murray Biggs writes in his article:

Not that it is a simple reverse, though true that the main plot of the first-the ruse by (not one but) two young men to get the brides they want against the odds-is thrown into relief by the main plot of the second, a young woman's counter-intuitive means of achieving her man. Since both plays are comedies, each stratagem works. Farquhar's beaux (could that, too, be a pun?) are hintingly named Aimwell and Archer. Aimwell even calls himself a

"marksman" (33). Eligible but impoverished, they pretend to be lord and servant respectively, and are on a tour of the provinces in search of women with fortunes.

Many critics focus on the representation of masculinity and femininity. According to sources, Cowley's career began as a result of attending a theatrical performance with her husband, where she proclaimed, "Why I could write as well myself!" Her husband's laughter at her exclamation served as a challenge to her, she returned home and began to write the work that would eventually develop into the comedy, *The Runaway*, published in 1776 (Gagen 107).

Cowley first sent the work to David Garrick, the acclaimed playwright, actor, and manager, who encouraged Cowley, and ultimately became a mentor to her and other female playwrights of the period (Finberg & Cadden 1). Cowley wrote nine comedies, one farce, one interlude, and two tragedies, although her comedies were her most successful works. Her two most popular pieces are *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780), the work considered here, and "one of the twelve main pieces most often performed during the last quarter of the eighteenth century," and *Who's the Dupe?* (1779), "one of the twelve afterpieces most often performed during that period" (East 259A).

For the purpose of this analysis, focus will be turned to one work in particular, *The Belle's Stratagem*. The main plot consists of the relationship between Letitia Hardy and Doricourt, who were contracted in marriage as children. They have not seen one another in years; however, and now it is time for them to be married. Although Doricourt intends to honor his contract, he is somewhat disappointed when he is reintroduced to Letitia stating, "Why, she's only a fine girl—Complexion, Shape, and Features,—nothing more!" (12). Doricourt, who has recently returned from

traveling on the continent, believes that a woman should have “Spirit! Fire! L’air enjoué! That Naiveté—something, nothing, which everybody sensates, and which nobody can describe” (12).

This extract clarifies that Letitia, on the other hand, is as attracted to Doricourt as ever, but recognizes his indifference towards her. She further states, “The blooming boy who left his Image in my young heart, is at four and twenty improved in every Grace that fixed him there. It is the same face that my memory, or my fancy, constantly painted—its Expression more heightened, its Graces more finished” (18). Letitia decries the flattery of men that she has received over her life because, “Have I not heard a thousand times of my Air, my Eyes, and my Shape—all made for Victory! And today, when I bent my whole Heart on one conquest, I have proved that those imputed charms are nothing, for—Doricourt saw them unmoved!” (18).

Despite the encouragements of her companion, Mrs. Rackett, to be content in his willingness to marry her, Letitia is unwilling to marry a man that does not desire her. Thus, she devises a plan, stating, “I am determined to touch his heart! (19). Plan is essentially, to turn Doricourt’s indifference into dislike, for, according to Letitia, “‘tis much easier to convert a sentiment into its Opposite, than to transform indifference into tender passion” (22). Practically, the plan is for Letitia to appear before Doricourt as unrefined and simple, which she does, to Doricourt’s dismay. He is ready to leave town, but Mrs. Rackett, obviously privy to Letitia’s plan, convinces Doricourt to delay his journey until after the masquerade that evening. At the masquerade, Doricourt falls in love with a masked dancer who dances “divinely--- charming!” (57).

This excerpt shows the masked dancer is Letitia. Following the masquerade, in an attempt to hasten things, Letitia’s father feigns a serious illness, making his final

wish to see Letitia married. Doricourt chooses to do the honorable thing, despite his newfound love for the unknown woman, and marries Letitia. Not long after the wedding, Letitia dons her disguise from the masquerade and appears to Doricourt, distraught over his marriage, stating that she would have been just as worthy of a bride, from equal family and fortune. Doricourt declares so much passion for another woman, Mr. Hardy suddenly emerges from his sickened state, chastising Doricourt. Doricourt implores the masked lady to unveil herself so that he may have an image to imprint on his mind forever. He goes on to say that “Your penetration discovered that you won not my heart at the first interview; but, you now have my whole Soul—your person, your face, your Mind, I would not exchange for those of any other woman breathing” (87).

Despite the fact that Doricourt originally thought he was perpetuating the institution of marrying for duty, now declares that he will have no other woman in the world. Furthermore, in his declaration to Letitia he includes his love of her whole being, including her mind, a concept not often verbalized in this period. In addition to there is a subplot, focusing on the relationship between Sir George Touchwood and Lady Frances Touchwood. In contrast to the relations of Doricourt and Letitia, the Touchwoods exemplify the marriage of a naïve woman, inexperienced in the ways of the life of Fashion, to a man deeply in love and prone to jealousy, as a result of his affection.

Thus, Cowley highlights another type of marriage—a sheltered woman with a husband that while in love with her, is prone to be possessive in nature. Lady Touchwood’s innocence is a magnet for the men of Fashion who seek out women, such as her, to conquest. Through a series of events, Lady Touchwood is almost compromised by a man named Courtall, but disaster is avoided by trickery.

Touchwood's relationship provides another view of marriage, an optimistic one, where both parties are mutual in respect and love.

The Belle's Stratagem was received with great acclaim and in 1780 London's critical review stated the work was "the best dramatic production of a female pen...since the days of Centlivre, to whom Mrs. Cowley is at least equal in fable and character, and far superior in easy dialogue and purity of diction" (qtd in Gagen 107). Despite the professional praise of a highly respected publication as the critical review, the resistance to female presence in the realm of playwriting is clearly evident. Not only that, but also the subject matter represented in these works, and their commentary on gender relations, marriage, and family life, points to larger societal issues at hand. While some have hailed *The Belle's Stratagem* as a progressive standard for a new woman, capable, intelligent, unwilling to marry for duty alone, others have yet remained reserved in their acclaim of Cowley as a feminist standard-bearer. Author Wendy Arons, takes one such stance, arguing that while tackling gender issues, Cowley presents "contradictory messages about female desire" (252).

According to sources, Cowley, who was known for her modesty, "publically distanced herself from the 'politics' of Mary Wollstonecraft" and thus has been, by some, set-aside as "less progressive and liberating" (Arons 252). However, I believe you can view Cowley's work from yet another position. Considering the societal notion that the realm of theatre was inherently base and immoral, one cannot not be surprised that Cowley remains fiercely domestic, in order to maintain her reputation, while also presenting herself as the antithesis of what many expected of theatrical women.

In this excerpt, Arons states that Letitia, in her changing herself in order to gain Doricourt's true love and affection, has chosen to define herself in reference to

the male gaze. She cites Letitia's response to Doricourt when he asks what she would do if she loved her husband and he, in turn was worthy of her love, as the ultimate proof of Letitia's seeking to make herself into the woman Doricourt desires to marry is related to gender role. The protagonist, Letitia is willing to form herself into the woman that her husband desires her to be, she is making this decision out of true, passionate love. Letitia claims that she would not enter into a loveless marriage, thus devised a plan to make this man fall in love with her. If Doricourt had not fallen for her, one must assume, given the nature of this character that she would not have entered into marriage.

As a result, while the conjecture of Letitia being defined by the male gaze is correct, that definition comes, as a result of Letitia's permission. If looking to the discussion of agency and authority, as often is the case in discussions of female characters, Letitia's agency over herself is overwhelming. Doricourt's main expression of agency is that Letitia does not inspire him on their first meeting.

For the rest of the play, he is merely subject to his feelings and passions, lending himself to be a relatively weak male character. Doricourt is the one who takes on the "responsibility" of marrying without desire, but from the onset of the play, Letitia shows no intention of entering into such an arrangement. She states, "Never to be his wife will afflict me less, than to be his wife and not be beloved" (38).

In the same way, the characters of Letitia's father and Mrs. Rackett show another male-female binary, where the strength of the woman overwhelms the man. Letitia and Mrs. Rackett are the ones who develop the plans, in the case of Letitia, and keep them moving, in the case of Mrs. Rackett, who is the one who convinces Doricourt to delay his trip in order to stay for the ball. In addition, at one point, when

discussing the plans, Mrs. Rackett tells Mr. Hardy, “Now I beg, Mr. Hardy, you won’t interfere in this business, it is a little out of your way” (40).

The idea that the women are the ones in authority, using the men as pawns to make their plans come to pass, is revolutionary, but hidden, in some respects, by the comic nature of the play. One could say that, depending on the director, this play could be rendered in an almost satirical fashion when it comes to male and female relations. Whether or not she meant for these discussions to take place in her lifetime, or to merely lay dormant until a time when society was ready, Cowley’s personal life, as well as her work, provides poignant cultural commentary. Whether or not she openly professed support for those taking on the gender debate, her actions by pushing back the boundaries, to step out of the domestic and into the public sphere of playwriting speaks volumes. Not only is that, but to retain her reputation, while venturing out a feat, not matched by many. As a critic of the time stated concerning Cowley’s life, “For to be public as a GENIUS, and private as a WOMAN, is to wear laurels gracefully veiled” (qtd in Cima 41).

Thus, the character with the most personal agency explicitly displayed is Letitia, even if it is expressed with the end result of her marrying. Despite the fact that this is not the ideal level of liberation a modern mind might hope for a woman, it is a relatively freeing idea, considering the social structure of the patriarchal culture in which Cowley was writing. Cowley does not seek to engage a revolutionary approach that might be misconstrued as attempting to overthrow the patriarchal culture of her time. Rather, Cowley’s work serves to open the floor for discussions concerning marriage, love, and societal conventions, concerning conventional gender roles. .

This research visualizes the concept of women’s empowerment and reinforce the triumph of new gender ideology .This play also stands for the theory of feminism.

The Belle's Stratagem has depicted females' agony or problem, especially the female protagonist Letitia's search for the identity and her fight for her existence, her struggle for her freedom, selfhood and independence. Letitia tries to escape from the male made limitations. Letitia's efforts to get married with her lover Doricourt seems very ridiculous in the play because at the masquerade, she has concealed her true identity and has successfully entrapped Doricourt's heart.

Cowley's female protagonist, Letitia is remarkably courageous and daring woman. She is an example of feminism in the eighteenth century era when such idea was virtually undiscovered. Cowley tries to show that women can have a view alongside a man. They can survive and search their destiny. Therefore, her female character, Letitia dares to disrupt the social norms and values of the patriarchal system of English society. The protagonist, Letitia plays a very subversive role with an apparatus of feminine literary text.

In addition, subversion of conventional gender roles can be termed as the way of changing the belief and attitudes towards patriarchal society to help after the conventional gender norms that put women in inferior position. This thesis seeks to prove how Cowley subverts gender roles in her eighteenth century comedy drama, *The Belle's Stratagem* through the characters, especially female protagonist, Letitia Hardy. Given Cowley's era, the role of Letitia as a heroine is remarkably progressive. Not only does Cowley create a wildly successfully comedy but also she delivers a feminist message under the guise of humor. Letitia is the most intelligent, courageous character in the play. Without her daring prowess and desire to live a good life married to a loving husband, Letitia would not be a heroine. In fact, she would become a victim of a male- dominated oppressive society. Her determination and

creativity are essential to the plot development and intrigue that Cowley creates within the conflicts of the play.

In a brash way, Cowley herself becomes a heroine through her writing, by delivering her feminist message in a palatable, comedy format. If it were direct or overly dramatic, her message may have never been produced, let alone cherished and applauded. The formation of conventional gender roles is a complex process that starts with conception, but which involves critical growth processes during gestation and learning experiences after birth. Belinda Brown, in her debut work, *Gender and Identity*, says:

There are points of differentiation all along the way, but language and tradition in many societies insist that every individual be categorized as either a man or a woman, although there are societies, such as the Native American identity of a two-spirit, which include multiple gender categories. When the gender identity of a person makes him/her a woman, but his/her genitals are male, she will likely experience what is called gender dysphoria i.e., a really deep unhappiness caused by his/her experience of him/herself as a woman and her lack of female genitals and breasts. (13)

This extract explores that gender role is fixed in early childhood and is thereafter static. This research has generally proceeded by asking transsexuals when they first realized that the gender role that society attempted to place upon them. These studies estimate the age at which gender identity is formed at around 2-3. Such research may be problematic if it made no comparable attempt to discover when non-transsexual people became aware of their own gender identities and choice of gender roles. Some people do not believe that their gender roles correspond to their biological sex,

including transsexual people, transgender people, and many intersexes individuals. Consequently, complications arise when society insists that an individual adopt a manner of social expression (gender role) which is based on sex, that the individual feels is inconsistent with that person's gender role.

There are many critics who criticize this research by applying of feminist theory. The first blow on patriarchal structure was given by Virginia Woolf in popular work *A Room of one's Own* (1929). She believed that women has always faced social and economic obstacle to their literary ambition. She was also very conscious of the imposed limitations of her own education. In this book she explores men's anger to women, misunderstanding between the sexes and above all psychological condition under which women were brought up. M.H. Abrams explains:

An important precursor in feminist criticism was Virginia Woolf, who in addition to her fiction. Wrote *A Room of One's* (1929) and numerous other essays on women authors and on the cultural, economic, and educational disabilities within what she called a 'patriarchal' society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities. (88)

In the feminist world, a radical criticism mood was depicted by Simon de Beauvoir's with her book entitled *The Second Sex* (1949). Through this book, Beauvoir established the principle of modern feminism. Abraham says:

A much more radical critical mode was launched in France by Simon de Beauvoir's *The second sex*, a wide – ranging critique of the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object, or "other" to man as the dominating "Subject" who is assumed to represent

humanity in general; the book also dealt with “the great collective myths” of women in the works of many male writers. (Abrams 88)

Simon de Beauvoir, an existentialist feminist critic and writer of France, strongly opposes the tendency of viewing women as ‘Second Sex’. She believes that existence always precedes essence. She objects to men’s attitude of discriminating between sexes as ‘subject’ and ‘object’ ‘men being the former and when the latter, She argues that “men define the human, not women. Woman is riveted into a lopsided relation with man, he is the one, she is the other” (quoted in Selden 135). According to her, all the male writers assume the female as negative. She emphasizes that women perceive man as self (subject) and themselves as other. The woman is inessential in the eyes of men who want to accept her as “other”. She vociferously refutes the notion of female essence prior to individual existence and attacks the patriarchal myths of women.

The primary objective of study is to bring feminist discourse of resistance in conversation with the hegemonic representation of women in dramatic discourse. Through critical analysis of *Letitia*, this research aims at deconstructing the patriarchal binaries. The female characters seemed as men. They manipulate a male-dominated system in England. Moreover, the study also aims at establishing the importance of female characters in Cowley’s play. Although this study makes significant use of concepts developed in feminist scholarship, it does not offer a comprehensive analysis of female agency, as conceptualized by Jean Gagen, remains the primary tools of analysis. Since the major objective of the study is to demonstrate the built-in female resistance to subjugation and a comprehensive analysis of Cowley’s subversion of conventional gender criticism in *The Belle’s Stratagem* lies outside the scope of this project.

This project clarifies that Feminism and identity are crucial to the construction of the play. The female protagonist, Letitia's plan that turns traditional eighteenth century courtship on its head is an incredibly stark and feminist movement. It empowers Letitia, placing her in the role of guiding and dictating the courtship. However, in order for her plan to work, she must hide her true identity upon first meeting Doricourt; she is indifferent because he is a stranger. Her indifference is reflected by her future husband, which sets the stage for a week, in passionate marriage. Knowing this, this Letitia concocts a plan and dons a new identity at the masquerade ball. In the play the role of the masquerade as a metaphor for the many masks women must wear within the society becomes an important element in the plot

The primary theme of *The Belle's Stratagem* is about marriage and courtship. Courtship is used to construct the foundation for marriage. Disruption of gender role can be defined as it is the way of changing the beliefs and attitudes towards Patriarchal society. It indirectly attempts to demolish the authority of political, religious, economical and social norms and values. Cowley has also tries to destroy the conventional gender discrimination and establish the women's rights, freedom, participation and position as men. She shows a dialogue spoken by the main characters that:

LETITIA: you see I can be anything; choose then my character- you shall fix it. Shall I be English wife? Or breaking from the bonds of Nature and Education, step forth to the word in all the captivating glare of foreign manners?

DORICOURT: Nothing can be captivating that you are not. You shall be nothing but yourself- I will not wrong your penetration, by pretending that you won my heart at the first interview; but you have

now my whole soul- your person, your face, your mind, I would not
exchange for those of any other women(SCENE 3,Act V)

In Act V, after the masquerade, Doricourt is distraught that the woman of his dreams is married. Seville says he must marry Letitia. Doricourt decides to fake insanity. Letitia is intelligent, independent attractive and wealthy woman. She finally reveals herself, stepping out from behind her physical and mental masks to expose her true charm. Doricourt sees her true beauty, both mentally and physically and he falls in love begging Letitia to be forever herself and at last they get married. It shows the post modern notion of feminist strategy.

However, it is disheartening because Letitia had to compromise her personality and manipulate a male- dominated system to gain Doricourt's at *The Belle's Stratagem* by Hannah Cowley Shows clearly subverts the gender role imposed to the women by society. The society analyzed tried to dominate women by constructing myth about them. The patriarchy imposes certain role to them. They give certain dress language etc. To the women which serves the ruling motives of male upon female. Letitia Hardy performs against conventionality of female. The protagonist Letitia disagrees to the social values which are biased to the women and raises female voices. It subverts the traditional expectations through performativity of masculine gender roles.

Letitia Hardy schemes to win the heart of her betrothed, Doricourt, while he conspires to have the engagement annulled. Lady Frances Touchwood is introduced to fashionable London society, to the great consternation of her jealous husband, Sir George. This enchanting eighteenth-century comedy of manners playfully looks at marriage and the roles. The title of the play itself is concerned with the social justice in marriage is blatant, the play mostly focusing on how women are supposed to be

docile in social settings. To break of this social narrative, Cowley creates female characters that are sharp and witty, women who know what they want and are determined to get it. Around the time of this play, marriage began to change and the idea of marrying for love instead of duty was more prominent. Cowley uses this play to comment on social constructs of marriage, and how romantic love is becoming accepted and sought after by women looking towards marriage.

Numerous critics have examined Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* as classical women characters in a dramatic discourse by analyzing the technique of traditional feminist literary analysis. However, only a few critics, including Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, Jean Gagen and Erin Isikoff have investigated Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* about the role of female protagonist, Letitia concerns with eighteenth-century marriage system. Elizabeth-kowaleski Wallace in his article, "Theatricality and Cosmopolitanism in Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* " asserts:

Let me see- What shall my dress be? No. A Grenadier No; no, that I foresee, would make a laugh. Hang me, if I don't send to my little Quick, and borrow his Jew Isaac's dress:- I know the Dog likes a glass of good wine; so I'll give him a bottle of my Forty-eight, and he shall teach me. Aye, that's it - I'll be the Cunning Little Isaac! If they complain of my want of wit, I'll tell 'me the cursed Duenna wears the breeches and has spoiled my part. (Act III.1.40)

The given extract shows here, Wallance claims that Cowley counts on her audience to recognize the transparency of Hardy's announcement: Quick both calls attention to the idiosyncrasies of his previous role and reminds us that he only plays at being Hardy here. This meta-theatrical moment is consistent with Cowley's attempt to foreground performance throughout her comedy. Wallace explores the role of Letitia that she uses

the art of the masquerade to win her lover, who does not scorn that romantic passion, which shows the masculine qualities of women and subversion of gender dichotomy in a patriarchal society.

Similarly, another critic, Jean Gagen argues:

Letitia was contracted in marriage to Doricourt when both of them were children. But until the time for their marriage was approaching, neither had seen each other for years. Unfortunately, Doricourt is not impressed by Letitia's reputation as a beauty why she's only a fine girl, complexion, shape and feature, nothing more ...she should have spirit, fire, air enjoyed! (Act 9)

In this extract, Erin Isikoff in his article, "Masquerade Modesty and Comedy in Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*," explores that Letitia's revolutionary stratagem, while it steals from Doricourt the energy of their courtship, it does not challenge its existence" It is empowering that she can use her wit and guile to circumvent traditional rules of courtship and change the course of her life by turning her loveless future into one of passion.

Terry Caslte, a feminist critic in her book, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* she writes:

Customarily eighteenth-century" masqueraders did not dress as themselves, nor did they dress as people like themselves... (0) ne was obliged to appear, in some sense, as one's opposite... The conceptual gap separating true and false selves was ideally an abyss. (18)

This extract shows yet Cowley's use of the masquerade not only contradicts this assertion but also expose the stable binary understanding of human identity on which this statement depends: to say that one went to the masquerade as one's opposite is to

imply that someone knew precisely who she or he was. In Cowley's comedy we see how the "true" self is nothing more than a provisional category; the mask neither covers an "authentic" identity nor reveals the "opposite" of the truth since the categories of a "true" and "False" identity collapse into one another. Moreover, Cowley shows epilogue in the play that:

NAY cease, and hear me—I am come to scold—
 Whence this night's plaudits, to a thought so old?
 To gain a Lover, hid behind a Mask!
 What's new in that? Or where's the mighty task?
 For instance, now—What Lady Bab, or Grace,
 E'er won a Lover—in her *natural* Face?
 Mistake me not—French red or blanching creams,
 I stoop not to—for those are hackney'd themes;
 The arts I mean are harder to detect,
 The Mask of Softness is at once applied,
 And gentlest manners ornament the Bride.
 The Masks fall off!—in charity I hide.
 'Tis plain, then, all the world, from Youth to Age,
 Appear in Masks—Here, only, on the Stage,
 You see us as we are: *Here* trust your eyes;
 Our wish to please admits of no disguise. (84)

This epilogue reflects that Cowley has made her point clear that Human identity is fulfilled not in the consistent refusal to perform but in the recognition that all social interaction is necessarily an act. The epilogue taunts those who insist on thinking themselves beyond acting their part. First, female audience

member are reminded that most natural female face is already masked. For Cowley, only the play can rescue humanity from its own savage potential, for the play has the virtue of veiling and unveiling its citizens.

Eventually the main protagonist's conversation shifts to the marital problem. A male protagonist, Doricourt explains that he fell in love with a different woman at the masquerade and cannot bear the thought of marrying his lover, Letitia. Suddenly, the woman from the masquerade enters the room and reveals herself as Letitia and she explains that she concocted her stratagem to entice Doricourt to love her. She tells Doricourt that she is willing to be any type of wife he desires, but he is so smitten that he begs her to be nothing but herself. But at the end of the drama they are married happily because of Letitia's stratagem. It shows that women can challenge the patriarchal social structure which constructed by the society.

Jean Gagen further states about *The Belle's Stratagem* in her essay, '*The Weaker Sex*' as she says:

Cowley apparently thought of marriage as a normal and desirable goal for women. Her witty heroines all look forward to marriage, but they demand marriage, based on love and mutual respect and trust and they expect to have the deciding vote in the selection of their husbands. She further states her most celebrated characters are undoubtedly her witty young heroines, who are often the prime manipulators and intriguers who usually centers on courtship and marriage. Letitia tells her father that she has a plan to win Doricourt's love, although this plan may seem a bit paradoxical. (Act.I.21)

In the given extract, Jean Gagen claims that Cowley's female protagonist, Letitia is trying to challenge the patriarchal male dominated society. She tries to quest her

identity and subverts the conventional gender role. Different critics give their opinions. Some critics make inter-textual reading of *The Belle's Stratagem*. Other critics put emphasis upon the phenomenon of cultural change. A few critics give importance to the psychology of Letitia Hardy. In contrast, the subversion of conventional gender role is of immense importance. These critics have shown how conventional gender role is subverted in the play.

Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* depicts that the eighteenth century playwrights were relatively isolated. Whether considering Centlivre's reversal of typical gender roles, Haywood's implementation of subtle resistance, Sheridan's satirical depictions of relationships, or Cowley's development of the female power of choice, each author expresses a distinctive voice of resistance. As we consider the works of female playwrights that blazed the trail of social, political, and cultural commentary from a feminine voice on stage, this study looks to build the bridge between the past and present by considering examples of modern women that courageously continued this unique form of resistance.

Additionally, this text illustrates a woman's voice. A consideration also felt by Cowley's Letitia in *The Belle's Stratagem*. Ultimately, over the course of the story, we see that the narrator, despite the struggles she faces, does not give up the fight, but also finds a way to fulfill her role as social activist. In this way, this research give us an example of breaking out of the traditional boundaries of genre and creating a new form, a form that will bring about change. As the emotion and weight of the stories became apparent, three questions served as the foundation for each of the interviews, "How did you first become aware of the fact that you were oppressed as a woman? How did that experience affect your life? How have you tried to change it?" The result is a powerful glimpse into the experiences of a few English women. Thus,

just as the eighteenth century authors we discussed, through this distinctive mode of communication and the voices released in this research.

To sum up, the play, *The Belle's Stratagem* by Hannah Cowley reveals an English society in which new gender roles of Restoration period that replacing the conventional gender roles of English society through the female protagonist, Letitia in relation with other characters. These new values are more liberal and opened minded, stressing the possibility for human improvement through awareness and liberal education. By employing radical heroine, Letitia, Cowley has subverted the prevalent narrow notions of gender roles. According to this research, some of the female characters represent the feminine treats and they try to subvert the conventional gender values and they try to bring the modernity in English society and male characters seem to be masculine in the play.

Hence, the present study will explore the key issues of the text to provide the characters of the play who are more radical and it will examine whether the writer has sufficient agency to the characters or not and see how she has presented the characters. The analysis of multiple female characters in the play demonstrates that they all are feminist because they try to subvert the conventional concept of gender role in English society. The title of the play also reflects that evidence of claim. This present research also proves that feminist perspective is not confined in English historiography. It even, highlights all the sidelines of history in any geographical location.

This research is mainly divided into three parts. The first part is introduction that suggests the issues of gender studies and feminism. In the second part, the research comprises the short and brief foreword of the whole research. It contains brief information of the playwright, Hannah Cowley and her works and it

encompasses the review of literature of the play, *The Belle's Stratagem*. It also exposes short history of feminism and how feminist theory will provides sufficient of evidences to prove the claim. At last, but not the least is conclusion that provides the overall winding up of the study.

Similarly, the male dominated society has failed in the judgment on the side of female. The dominance of the male is only due to the marginalization of the female. Feminists believe that justice and equality cannot be established until the dominant structure of patriarchy is dismantled, Hannah Cowley's play, *The Belle's Stratagem*, the topic of social injustice in marriage is blatant, the play mostly focusing on how women are supposed to be docile in most social settings. To break up this social narrative, Cowley creates female characters they are sharp and witty women who know what they want and are determined to get it. Around the time of this play, marriage began to change and the idea of marrying for love instead of duty was more prominent. Cowley uses this play to comment on social construct of marriage, and how romantic love is becoming accepted and sought after by women looking towards marriage.

The female protagonist, Letitia seems brilliant and witty in the plot. She comes up with a plot to prove to her fiancé that she can be as flirtatious as the European women, as well as be virtuous when doing so. She warns her fiancé Doricourt to "be ware of imprudent curiosity" In the play, Cowley's anticipating of feminist movement in Letitia's efforts to get married with Doricourt goes at odd with a boy's initiative to get a girl of his choice in a patriarchal society. Letitia's masquerading is meant at letting Doricourt knows her qualities as a human being not her beauty. Letitia attempts to challenge the conventional stereotypical normative cultural values and practices by changing her identity. Her reliance on male counterparts for her identity

and survival undermines her subversive attempt. In this respect, Hannah Cowley tries to subvert the conventional gender roles which are established on the false essence of male ideology. For that she raises questions against the prescribed gender structure in the then eighteenth-century English society.

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