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**Запорожець Г.В.**, Миколаївський державний гуманітарний університет ім. Петра Могили

**Запорожець Галина Вікторівна** – кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент Миколаївського державного гуманітарного університету ім. Петра Могили

## Enlightenment women's voices: gender roles and personal issues

*Стаття “Жіночі голоси Просвітництва: гендерні ролі у суспільстві та особистісні питання” розглядає зміни у житті американців вісімнадцятого сторіччя і, перш за все, гендерні ролі, де домінувала патріархальна традиція в усіх сферах, в тому числі і в літературі. Найбільш відомі романи цього часу “Шарлота, правдива історія” Сюзани Росон та “Кокетка, історія Елізи Вартон” Ганни Фостер піднімають питання про місце жінки у суспільстві, яке до сьогодні є актуальним.*

*The article considers the changes in the American society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and investigates the gender roles in all spheres of life including literature. The most famous novels of the time are Susanna Haswell Rowson's “Charlotte Temple” and Hannah Foster's “The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton” that discuss the actual today question of women's place in society.*

Eighteenth-century Americans witnessed significant changes in their lives, changes demographic, economic, political, cultural. The population grew both by natural increase and by the migration that was marked by increasing numbers of non-English settlers – Scotch-Irish, German, Scottish, Dutch, French, Jews, about 275,000 black slaves were brought to the colonies during the century; Spanish missionaries moved to Florida and Southwest. Ethnic diversity strengthened the population and helped bring about a rising standard of living, which influenced all spheres of life in colonies including literature. Like their European counterparts, educated colonists were well aware of the scientific findings of Sir Isaac Newton, political, scientific and philosophical theorizing of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and agreed with Alexander Pope's assertion that Newton showed the superiority of mankind in his ability to “unfold all Nature's Laws”.

Gender roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were fairly well established in most communities. The patriarchal social tradition allocated to men certain social privileges outside the home – church and state affairs, that were not available to women. Colonial life, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century, was hierarchically structured, men over

women, and whites over blacks and Native Americans. Power was in the hands of the dominant white men, typically educated and engaged in city or colonial government. The number of women, Afro-Americans, Native Americans who participated in print culture was very small in the eighteenth century.

The abundance of the literature from this era might lead readers falsely to conclude that most Americans could both read and write. Yet almost all blacks, half the white women, and one-fifth the white men could do neither. Colonial culture was at least in the first half of the eighteenth century, before the market economy started to develop and printing became established an oral culture, one that depended upon the person-to-person transmission of information. By mid-century, this situation began to shift. The newer elite culture, made up of merchants and tradesmen in cities and northern farmers and southern rural plantation-holders, was oriented toward the printed medium, toward individual rather than communal accomplishment, and toward the city. Literacy became a sign of status and thus an accomplishment. Parents who held property wanted to distinguish themselves from their neighbors, so they sent their male children to study, usually with

the local minister, in preparation for collegiate training in one of the newly founded universities—schools now known as the College of William and Mary, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, Rutgers or to Harvard and Yale. The wealthiest families sent their children to Europe—usually London or Edinburgh (the center of Enlightenment thought in Scotland). Very few families sent women to study but gradually, by mid-century, more and more children—male and female—were being trained in reading and writing. Along with intellectual education, usually in reading but not in writing, girls from elite families might also have received instruction in music, dancing, and fancy needlework, these three abilities signifying genteel status.

Those members of non-dominant cultures who wrote adopted a variety of techniques that enabled their works to be published. For example, Phillis Wheatley found religious poems and sermons to be acceptable to white readers. Wheatley constantly makes reference to “Ethiop” as if accepting her inferior status. At the same time, she managed to use her position as a Christianized “Ethiop” to speak to the Cambridge students about a Christianity that offered equality to all who embraced belief.

Half-humorously but with the seriousness of one socially and legally disempowered, Abigail Adams added a “by the way” in her letter (March 31, 1776) to her husband John Adams, who was in Philadelphia attending the emergency sessions of the Continental Congress. “By the way,” she wrote, “in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors” [1, 502]. Abigail Adams’s plea here, for equal rights and equal justice under the law, went unheard. John Adams remarked in his return letter (April 14, 1776),

“As to your extra-ordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colleges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented” [2, 906].

This remarkable exchange between two remarkable people is perhaps the best-known exchange of the era and a written evidence available to us about the extent to which people in non-dominant social and legal circumstances—particularly women, African-Americans, and Native Americans in Anglo-America—willingly spoke about and thus openly confronted the boundaries set for them by the white, elite, group of men.

The cultural norms were politically conservative and white-dominant. During the 1780s and 1790s white women, African-Americans, and Native

Americans were finding voice for their positions, as never before, they learned how to use the word to influence masses of people. The Enlightenment attitudes about rebellious agitation emerged in women’s writing about human nature, liberty, law. The changes in the life of Americans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century provided unusual opportunities for women writers. A great number of increasingly educated readers would require reading materials. Like the legal and social institutions that were fostered during the era, literature was considered a means by which American cultural norms could be reinforced.

As women read novels, women began to write novels. This was the case in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the first American novels were published and this remains the case in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps because the novel is such a loose and flexible literary form women have written every conceivable kind of novel, using various styles and conventions, and have addressed them to a variety of social causes, political issues, personal aspirations and group identities. There are reasons for the close relationship between the early American novel and women in this period. First, the novel was an accessible form. It did not require advanced learning in the classical tradition as did many forms of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because women were barred from higher education at that time and received primary education, the novel could be read by middle class women and even by women from the working classes. In a number of novels, classical allusions are actually defined in the text, again making the books accessible to readers. Second, the establishment of lending libraries in even the smallest frontier communities made novels available at prices that women could afford (a fee \$4-6 a year).

The American novel began in the early national period, the era following the signing of the US constitution. The two best-selling novels of the time were Susanna Haswell Rowson’s “*Charlotte, a Tale of Truth*” (1791), later and popularly known as “*Charlotte Temple*” and Hannah Webster Foster’s “*The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton*” (1797). Both were about women and explicitly addressed to women. Even the novel now regarded as the first American novel William Hill Brown’s “*The Power of Sympathy*” 1789, was published anonymously and was long thought to have been written by a woman.

In early America, women had few rights: they couldn’t vote, serve on juries, make wills or sign contracts. Ignored by law and politics in the new nation, women found themselves the centre of the world represented in novels. The plots of many early novels often revealed around everyday life situations of concern of women. Susanna Haswell Rowson’s “*Charlotte Temple*” became the first American bestselling novel when published in 1794. Its subtitle “*A Tale of Truth*” may account for

its immense popularity in a puritan society. The novel was important in portraying standards of morality prevalent in eighteenth-century America. Rowson's depiction of the Revolutionary War as the background of her romance was also seen as having significance in American literary history. Patricia Parker in her book on Rowson states that Rowson lived during a crucial period of nation's history, as it turned from provincial colony to pre-industrial nation. She herself strongly identified with the political objectives of the new republic and came to consider herself American despite her British birth, as she lived most of her life in this country [Parker, 1986].

Like most writers of the era who have promoted the values held by government leaders Susanne Rowson in the "Preface" to her novel states, that her book was designed for perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex, and continues; "I wrote with a mind anxious for the happiness of that sex whose morals and conduct have so powerful an influence on mankind in general" [7; 1217].

In Rowson's "*Charlotte Temple*" a teenage girl runs away from the home in England in the company of a dashing young soldier. Abandoned in the new world, she sinks into dreadful poverty, and then dies, bearing her illegitimate daughter among strangers. Rowson doesn't condemn Charlotte for her promiscuity; rather, she blames a social system that leaves her so innocent, an easy prey to unscrupulous men. The portrayal of Charlotte is masterful. The girl's naïve and ingenuous character is rendered convincingly. Rowson details the progress of her seduction with sympathy and keen psychological insights into the working of her mind.

The writer also devoted considerable time in this short novel to describing other characters, Charlotte's parents. Lucy Eldridge Temple and her father had been driven to a debtor's prison by the machinations of an unscrupulous man who had designs on Lucy. Her refusal under intense pressure, to submit to the kind of arrangement Charlotte has with Montraville brings disaster to the household but the Eldridges and Temple never doubt that she has done the right thing. It is thus doubly poignant that Lucy's daughter Charlotte should yield as she does. It is ironic and also understandable that such an idealistic couple could produce a child as dangerously naïve as Charlotte.

Montraville plays an evil role in the story. Attracted to Charlotte and unable to resist seducing her, though he knows that her lack of fortune will make marriage impossible; he abandons her because he believes his deceitful friend Belcour. That friend Belcour had placed Charlotte in a compromising position in order to alienate her from Montraville. Also, Montraville cannot resist the charm of Julia Franklin, his new love. Though Montraville seduced Charlotte, he suffers intense pangs of

conscience, for what he has done and early dies. By making Montraville a sympathetic human being instead of a stock – figure of evil, Rowson shows that such things can really happen, even to the most well-meaning people. Melodramatic situations described by Rowson are a protest against the female condition and at the same time the source of her power, concern for freedom.

While "*Charlotte Temple*" has a tendency to view women as weak, helpless and in need of male protection – its heroine is passive and dies after she is abandoned by the men in her life – the novel has also been read as a protest against women's position in society. Rowson's own life was characterized by a resourcefulness that testifies to the possibilities for women's independent thought and action in eighteenth-century America.

The plot is a good deal more complicated in Hannah Foster's "*The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton*". The novel was an immediate success upon its publication in 1797 and along with Susanna Rowson's "*Charlotte Temple*" became the bestseller of the 1790s. Using the epistolary genre, Hannah Foster based her novel of temptation and seduction on the tragedy of a woman from Hartford, named Elizabeth Whitman, whose sad story was well known by the time Foster published her novel. Both Eliza and Elizabeth were the daughters of respected ministers and were known among their friends for their wit, intelligence, charm.

The main character, Eliza Wharton, is well educated and we learn near the end of the book in her thirties when she "falls". Yet, even in this instance, Foster critiques both the character and the society in which she lives. Under particular attack is the double sexual standard by which a woman's sexual transgressions are punishable by abandonment and even death, whereas a man's are often overlooked as trivial offenses.

"*The Coquette*" raises the question of freedom, its meaning and its limits, in a new land newly dedicated to births of new freedoms. Many critics see Eliza Wharton as a rebel who seeks a freedom not typically allotted to her sex, and thus she consistently rejects the advice of friends who encourage her to settle into the "modest freedom" of marriage. Cathy N. Davidson in "*Revolution and the Word: Rise of the Novel in America*" speaks about the "*The Coquette*" as much more than simply an allegory of seduction, she considered it as less a story of the wages of sin than a study of the wages of marriage [Davidson, 1986].

In the novel Hannah Foster follows the epistolary sentimental tradition. The story of Eliza Wharton's temptation, seduction, distress, and death is revealed in letters between friends. The subjects touched upon in letters range from friendship and marriage to economic security and social status. According to Cathy N. Davidson, the letters

between friends expose the fundamental injustices of a patriarchal culture that places the opportunities for women within a limited domestic sphere. The high quality of the novel stems from the careful use of voice to create distinctive characters and from the depth of social analysis of sex roles, customs, conventions underlying the content of the letters. Foster masterfully characterizes Eliza; her letters have unique rhythm, tone, vocabulary.

"*The Coquette*" raises the question about the extent to which individual can remain free in a society. Eliza is a coquette, but she is also an intelligent young woman unwilling to bury herself in a conventional marriage with a man (Mr. Boyer), whom she finds interesting but dull. Reverend Boyer although respectable, is unsuitable for

marriage being descended, pedant, with unrestrained temper. She would gladly be married like her friends the Richmans, but she doesn't see such a perspective for herself. For Eliza "Marriage is the tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state" [5; 1204].

At the end of the eighteenth century American Literature was still far from having found a distinctive voice. But, as Giles Gunn states, the seeds of American writing had been deeply planted, it now only awaited the chemistry of future experience to germinate them and set them free. Among "the seeds of American writing" – distinct women's voices of Susanna Rowson and Hannah Webster Foster who used novel to raise a female voice for their position.

### Література

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