



## **THE GENDER ROLES IN FIELDING'S *THE HISTORY OF TOM JONES: A FOUNDLING* IN THE LIGHT OF HÉLÈNE CIXOUS'S FEMINIST APPROACH**

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Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling* (1749), portraying the panorama of the 18th century English society in a realistic manner, can be analyzed in the light of feminist philosophy due to the reflections of the problematic position of the female characters under the oppression imposed by the male-dominated society in the novel. The secondary status attributed to women and the primary roles attributed to men show that female characters are repressed because of the stereotyped roles determined by the patriarchal society. In this regard, considering the rise of feminism and the discourse put forward by the French feminist Héléne Cixous, it is clear that her feminist theory can be adapted into Fielding's novel, therefore in this study the most significant characteristics of the feminist approach introduced by Cixous will be identified and explored in *The History of Tom Jones* by questioning the gender roles in the 18th century English society.

**Keywords:** Henry fielding, *The history of Tom Jones*, Héléne Cixous, Feminism, Gender roles.

Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling* (1749), illustrating the 18th century English society and reflecting the combination of fact and fiction by means of the fictitious characters' experiences, is a landmark in English realistic novels. Highlighting the conflict between virtue and vice, exploring the conflicts between women and men, *Tom Jones* mirrors the life of the individualized characters, the ordinary people in a realistic manner. In this sense, the real-like persons and fictional incidents come together and shed light on the realities of the 18th century England. In this sense, one of the problematic issues of the 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the destructive nature of the patriarchal values upon women, can be recognized in the novel, so the French feminist, Héléne Cixous's emphasis on the necessity to destroy the taboos preventing women from achieving their goals is worth discussing.

The repression of women, their physical as well as psychological confinement can be observed in the novel through the experiences of the female characters; especially the parts related to the character, Sophia, should be analyzed. Taking Sophia's situation into account, it is noteworthy that she is faced with the oppression of the male-dominated society, which turns the lives of many women into metaphorical imprisonment with strict orders and continuous surveillance in the 18<sup>th</sup> century England, therefore these females become invisible in social life and turn out to be insignificant because of the patriarchal values as Cixous also underlines:

Women. Invisible as humans. But, of course, perceived as tools – dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded, etc. [...]. [...] there have to be two races – the masters and the slaves. [...] the world is divided in half, organized hierarchically, and that it maintains this distribution through violence. [...]. There has to be some 'other' – no master without a

slave, no economic-political power without exploitation, no dominant class without cattle under the yoke[...]. If there were no other, one would invent it. (*The Newly Born Woman* 201)

In this regard, Cixous's criticism about the binary oppositions and stereotyped roles shows that the unquestioned superior position of man and the inferior position of woman should be questioned in order to eliminate the inequality between the male and the female. Moreover, as a postmodern feminist, she underlines the fact that the superior cannot claim his superiority without the inferior; in other words, without the discourse asserting the secondary position of the females, the males cannot assert that they have the primary importance. Men attribute an underprivileged role for women in order to claim a privileged status. As a consequence, in *Tom Jones*, such a kind of inferior position is also attributed to Sophia by the male-dominated society. Since she does not have any voice or right, she is forced to marry for the sake of materialistic understanding. This negative impact of arranged marriage upon women comes into view through the reflections of Sophia's suffering because of her father's insistence on her marriage for the sake of materialism. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century English society, people regarded marriage as a way to gain prosperity, to have a place in the social arena and wanted to gain fortune and property through marriage. In this perspective, in the novel, Mr Blifil, whose aim is to marry Sophia for the sake of materialistic reasons, comes to the fore as it can be seen in the quotation:

He was indeed perfectly well satisfied with his prospect of success; for as to that entire and absolute possession of the heart of his mistress which romantic lovers require, the very idea of it never entered his head. Her fortune and her person were the sole objects of his wishes, of which he made no doubt soon to obtain the absolute property; as Mr Western's mind was so earnestly bent on the match; and as he well knew the strict obedience which Sophia was always ready to pay to her father's will [...]. (109)

The arranged marriage is regarded by Mr Blifil as a success which is a vehicle to gain "absolute property." Instead of Sophia's love, her "fortune" leads him to that match, which will enable him to become more wealthy. His emphasizing Sophia's submission to her father and her powerlessness in front of men justifies that the female is seen just as an object that should obey the dictates of the powerful. As Rivero stresses, "women are defined with property (136) [...] and Sophia [...] is correspondingly diminished as she becomes part of the property relations" (139). This proves the situation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century women who had no identity at home and in the social fields. Similarly, Cixous also refers to the repressed position of women and their identity problems along these words: "She restrains herself, and is restrained, by a thousand bonds, hitched, conjugated, strings, chains, nets, leash, feeding dish, network of servile, reassuring dependencies. She is defined by her connections, wife of, as she was daughter of, from hand to hand [...]" (*Coming to Writing* 39-40). Thus, women can prove their identities only through marriage and can come into sight merely as a wife, as a mother or as a daughter not as an independent individual, as a result such a kind of restricted life results in nothing but oppression. The way to overcome the inequality between the male and the female is to believe that man and woman are equal in terms of intelligence and skills, in this regard "Cixous views the division of people into the categories "man" and "woman" as a natural result of biological difference" (Crowder 137). Therefore, the difference between the two sexes is just based on the biological dissimilarities, so it proves that the secondary role attributed to women due to their biological difference is a discrimination.

Considering Sophia's vulnerable position, the male characters' disregarding her emotions and ideas, what can clearly be underlined is that she represents many women of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English society, whose lives were directed, whose movements were controlled and whose decisions were determined by men. The dialogue between Sophia and her father very explicitly portrays the absolute authority of men in society:

She begged him not to make her the most miserable creature on earth by forcing her to marry a man whom she detested. [...] "Oh! sir, [...] not only your poor Sophy's

happiness; her very life, her being, depends upon your granting her request. I cannot live with Mr Blifil. To force me into this marriage would be killing me.” “Then die [...]” cries he. [Sophia cries], “Can the best of fathers break my heart? Will he kill me by the most painful, cruel, lingering death? [...] [S]uch a marriage is worse than death.” (110)

Sophia’s indicating that she will be “the most miserable creature on earth,” if she marries a man she hates, efficiently reflects that the life, happiness and the future of women depend on the males, who oppress women with strict rules. Obliging someone to marry for the sake of self-interest is nothing but repressing the sentiments and opinions of an individual who has the right to take her own decisions and to determine the person she will marry as Sophia also says: “I shall never marry a man I dislike” (125). In this sense, Fielding “show[s] us [a scene] [...] which [...] portray[s] the [...] conflict between father and daughter” (Watt 262). The reason of the conflict between the characters is associated with the conflict between the opposite sexes. On the one hand, the male claims that he has the right to determine the future of the female, on the other hand the female asks for her rights to achieve freedom. In this regard, Cixous also underlines this contradiction between the female and the male and highlights the suffocation experienced by women:

Don’t go near the abyss. If she should discover its (her) force! If she should, suddenly, take pleasure in, profit from its immensity! If she should take the leap! And fall not like a stone, but like a bird. If she should discover herself to be a swimmer of the unlimited! Let yourself go! Let go of everything! Lose everything! Take to the air. Take to the open sea. [...]. Go, fly, swim, bound, descend, cross, love the unknown, love the uncertain, love what has not yet been seen, love no one, whom you are, whom you will be, leave yourself [...]. (*Coming to Writing* 40)

As Cixous underlines, women have not been allowed to explore their identities, talents, capabilities for many centuries, as a result they could not compete with the power of men before the rise of feminist movement. According to Cixous, if women have the chance to break the barriers, eliminate the stereotyped roles, destroy the taboos of the male-dominated society, they can achieve proving themselves and become active participants of social life. As Vitanza also asserts, “for Cixous men and women, male and female are not fixed [...] cultural categories” (334); according to the cultural values of different societies, the roles of women and men differ, as a result one cannot assert that gender is a fixed cultural category. In this regard, the cultural norms in the 18<sup>th</sup> century English society created a primary position for men and an insignificant status for women. Most of the women could not be involved in life itself and explore the “unknown” due to the patriarchal norms of the male-dominated society as observed in Fielding’s *Tom Jones* as well, as a consequence the typical clash between the powerful male and the powerless female in the 18<sup>th</sup> century English society appears in the novel. The experiences of the fictitious characters, reflecting the reality of the age, contribute to the didactic concept of the novel. Sophia’s being captivated at home by her father, her aunt’s instructing her about the negative outcomes of challenging the accepted rules of society, can also be realized within the relations between men and women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century community. Sophia’s imprisonment, Mrs Western’s training her in order to make her a ‘gentlewoman’ and her stress on the benefits of marriage, which is based on profits, can be observed along these remarks:

Sophia had passed the last twenty-four hours in no very desirable manner. During a large part of them she had been entertained by her aunt with lectures of prudence, recommending to her the example of the polite world, where love [...] is at present entirely laughed at, and where women consider matrimony, [...] only as the means of making their fortunes, and of advancing themselves in the world. (118)

The heroine's imprisonment within the walls of her own house, her being guided by Mrs Western, the lady's stressing the necessity of matrimony for becoming prosperous and having a social status in the world, show that the understanding of marriage is based not on love, but on materialistic reasons and self-interest. It should be noted that the principles of the male-dominated social order make women the prisoners of the males who abuse their power and impose psychological pressure upon the females. In this outlook, the arranged marriage Sophia is exposed to, despite her love for Tom, enables the readers to analyze her emotions and her psychological suffering as it is pointed out: "Sophia had been lately so distracted between hope and fear, her duty and love to her father, her hatred to Blifil, her compassion, and her love for Jones [...]" (222). The conflict between love and duty leads her to "please and honour her father, but in the face of his exercise of [...] absolute authority, [...] [to] rebel" (Brown 108). Consequently, although Sophia illustrates the agonies of the powerless women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society, she also epitomizes a new type of female who rejects the unquestionable power of men. Similarly, Cixous, in her work, "The Laugh of the Medusa", emphasizes the necessity to destroy the stereotyped role attached to women and to recreate women's image as follows: "[...] what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project. [...]. It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her [...]" (875, 878). Unless the underprivileged role allotted for women is destroyed, it is impossible to recreate the image of "New Woman". When women have the opportunity to enjoy freedom, equality and justice, they can struggle with the restrictions and repression of the male-dominated society and eliminate the passive, silent and secondary position attributed to females, thus the concept of "New Woman" will appear; in other words, this new type of woman has the freedom of competing with the powerful status of man, proving her talents, capabilities, self-determination and self-confidence, showing what she can achieve when she is allowed to stand on her own feet and demonstrate her potential to attain success. Thus, "Cixous implores women [...] to seize and make words their own, to take risks, themselves of fear and caution, to open up the possibility of loving with all of themselves [...]" (Davies 514). Why Cixous encourages women to express themselves, to have courage, to challenge against all of the threats of the male-dominated society and to love themselves, is related to the importance of their gaining self-respect, self-determination and self-confidence to eliminate the injustice inflicted on them by men.

Considering Cixous's emphasis on the importance of independence for women, it is worth dwelling on certain details in the novel that confirm the necessity of giving women freedom, enabling them to prove their identities and to prevent men from inflicting their supremacy over females as it is obvious through Mrs Western's words: "English women [...] are no slaves. We are not to be locked up [...]. We have as good a right to liberty as yourselves. We are to be convinced by reason and persuasion only, and not governed by force" (120). Although Mrs Western supports the arranged marriages of the time as it is mentioned before, at the same time, she expresses her ideas about the vulnerability of women and the necessity to improve their positions. Underlining that women are not "slaves" and they should enjoy the right of freedom, she highlights the fact that instead of implementing power upon women or confining them both physically and mentally, the males should give them the opportunity of voicing their ideas and showing their abilities. The obedience of the female in society to the dictatorial attitude of men clearly portrays the spread of the materialistic understanding in marriage institution as it is seen from Mrs Western's words as well:

It is impossible you should hate a man from whom you have received no injury. By hatred, therefore, you mean no more than dislike, which is no sufficient objection against your marrying of him. I have known many couples, who have entirely disliked each other, lead very comfortable genteel lives. (124)

Her trying to persuade Sophia to marry Mr Blifil and her paying no attention to the young woman's dislike of the man by stressing that many couples go on their marriage in spite of their dislike of each other, reveal that women are accustomed to performing what the society expects and regards as appropriate. As a result, as Cixous stresses most of the women are not aware of the potential they have

and do not have the chance to achieve their goals and desires, therefore Cixous points out her complaint about the secondary position of women: “[...] there is so little room for her desire in society that, because of not knowing what to do with it, she ends up not knowing where to put it or if she even has it” (*The Newly Born Woman* 207). As Cixous underlines, women cannot achieve their desires as there is little place for them in society; the more they are restricted, the more they become unaware of the desire within their souls to achieve their goals. Similarly, in *Tom Jones*, the female characters cannot realize their yearnings and ambitions due to the repression inflicted on them.

Analyzing the situation of the women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century English society, it would not be wrong to assert that their situation was not different from Sophia’s condition. Especially people’s ignoring the desires, emotions and opinions of women draws attention both in *Tom Jones* and in the society of the era. It is seen that the harmony between the partners in marriage is not taken into account because of the materialistic understanding in society as it is noticeable as well when Mrs Western’s likening Sophia’s marriage to the ones between kingdoms is analyzed:

[...] when a daughter of France is married into Spain, the princess herself is alone considered in the match? No! it is a match between two kingdoms, rather than between two persons. The same happens in great families such as ours. The alliance between the families is the principal matter. You ought to have a greater regard for the honour of your family than for your own person [...]. (125)

It is recognizable that for the sake of the “honour” of the families and for the agreement between them, the women are obligated to accept what the others plan, determine and desire. Consequently, it is impossible for these women in such a vulnerable position not to turn out to be programmed, machine-like beings, who are manipulated by the dictates of the others, as a result of which mental depression inevitably takes place. In this manner, it is evident that “[h]uman nature and especially human psychology are crucial interests for Fielding” (Rosengarten 54-5). Exposing the inner worlds of his characters, he aims at describing their sufferings and metaphorical confinement; particularly, women’s distressed position and their social imprisonment in society are reflected in the novel. Thus, what Cixous indicates about the limited environment and the restricted opportunities allotted to women comes to the fore:

When I say ‘woman,’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the ‘dark’ – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute – there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 875-876)

The inevitable struggle of women comes into view as a result of the traditional understanding of the male-dominated society. The way how to overcome the conventional patriarchal notions is to have a “universal woman subject,” who will encourage and motivate women to challenge against the stereotyped gender roles, who will eliminate the darkness around women’s lives by destroying the “general” or “typical” image of females. In the same manner, in *Tom Jones*, female characters are faced with a similar kind of oppression. The description of Molly as a character left behind, abandoned with a child is doubtlessly common in the male-dominated society and her despising men for their immorality can be noticed through her words:

And this is your love for me, to forsake me in this manner, now you have ruined me! How often, when I told you that all men are false and perjury alike, and grow tired of us as soon as ever they have had their wicked wills of us. [...] No, I shall always hate and despise the whole sex for your sake. (81)

It is worth emphasizing that the illustration of men by Molly harshly condemns the accepted norms of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English male-dominated society. The male’s destroying the lives of females and their

behaving women as if they were objects could be recognized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society, therefore Molly criticizes Tom and the others who abandon women after possessing their bodies and minds. In this sense, the women oppressed by the authority of the patriarchal society turn out to be mechanized beings without any freedom of choice, consequently Cixous's reference to the importance of freedom for women should be taken into consideration: "Gain your freedom: get rid of everything, vomit up everything, give up everything [...]. Search yourself, seek out the shattered, the multiple I, that you will be still further on, and emerge from one self, shed the old body, shake off the Law" (*Coming to Writing* 40). As seen in the quotation, Cixous motivates women to discover their abilities, destroy the "shattered" female image created by the patriarchal society, get rid of the old, established representation of females and change the "Law" about the gender roles established by the male-dominated society, as a consequence women will gain their freedom and prove their talents.

Finally, it is clear that in *The History of Tom Jones*, there is no equality between female and male characters. Female characters are repressed by the patriarchal values as a consequence of the dominance of male characters in the novel. Especially the practice of arranged marriage destroys female characters who do not have any control over their own lives. In this sense, the feminist discourse of Cixous, her emphasis on the silence and subservience of women under the dominance of men, can also be observed in Fielding's *Tom Jones*. She encourages women to ask for their rights, challenge against the strict norms of the male-dominated society, prove their identities, improve their skills, discover the undiscovered, change the wrong discourse about women by resisting the oppressed image of women, recreating the discourse about females and inventing the image of New Woman, thus it is obvious that since the discourse created by male characters in the novel is dominant, female characters are exposed to oppression and abuse of power, so in the light of Cixous's feminist philosophy it is no doubt that the discourse about gender roles determining the powerful and the powerless sex in society and categorizing people should be recreated so as to achieve equality between woman and man.

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