



Feminism Explored in Joan Barfoot's *Abra*: An Analysis

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Abstract

This paper analyses the feminist elements present in the novel *Abra* authored by Joan Barfoot, a Canadian feminist writer of the second wave feminism era in the 1960s and 1970s. The period impacted many social changes including civil rights for women, and secured power in the hands of women. The novel *Abra* captures the significance of the period through an empowered female protagonist who renounced her family and society to gain autonomy. Moreover, the novel offers insights into the struggles of women as well as their established power in a world dominated by men. Hence, this article aims to examine the feminist themes in the novel and analyses how the novel depicts the treatment of women in the Canadian patriarchal society. Further, the paper focuses on the protagonist's psychological transformation from an ordinary woman to an empowered individual who defies patriarchal domination, while exploring the period's spirit of quest for freedom.

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Feminism, Empowerment

Introduction

Late 20th-century Canadian novels often depict female wilderness and quest narratives. Works such as Marian Engle's *Bear* (1976), Joan Barfoot's *Abra* (1978), Margret Atwood's *Edible Woman* (1969), and Maria Campbell's *The Stone Angel* (1964) resonate with the women's liberation and feminist cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s. These writers strongly advocate for women's emancipation through their writings. Hence, this article focuses specifically on Joan Barfoot's protagonist *Abra* who rebels against societal treatment of women and the lowest status assigned to them in domestic life. Barfoot's primary concern in the novel came from the civil rights movement of the 1950s which propelled second wave feminism, advocating for women's rights in all aspects of life, including the elimination of sexual stereotypes, labor laws, and equal job opportunities. Therefore, Barfoot conceived this spirit in the creation of her character *Abra*. Further, the theoretical discussions by authors like Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* supporting the feminist ideology shaped the social mindset of the time. Thus, Barfoot echoes this feminist consciousness of her time in the novel *Abra*, marking a demand for equality and justice between genders.

Joana Louise Barfoot, the Canadian novelist, is known for her award-winning works. Born on May 17, 1946, in Owen Sound, Ontario, she pursued a degree in English at the University of Western Ontario. Barfoot initially worked as a reporter and editor in various newspaper companies. Her interest in writing was ignited by her mother and a teacher, leading her to become a successful writer. In addition to writing, she teaches creative writing classes. She has written around 11 novels mainly dealing with women's issues. Her works have been compared to those of popular writers such as Anne Tyler and Margaret Atwood. Barfoot has also

received the Marian Engel Award, presented by the Writer's Trust of Canada, which further exemplifies her recognition in the Canadian literary landscape.

Abra is Barfoot's debut novel, which earned several awards. It is a feminist work that delves into the lives of women and their relationships within a patriarchal society. The story revolves around the title character, Abra, a woman who faced numerous challenges in her life. She is a young protagonist who, unsatisfied with her domestic life, abandons her husband and children to settle in a remote location. Her act of renouncing her family members is a protest against the exploitation of women, and a voice against male chauvinism and modern capitalism. It also signifies the protagonist's transformation from her former life to a renewed one with a revitalised sense of freedom, breaking free from the bondage of patriarchal domination. As the novel explores the prevailing feminist spirit of the time, it sometimes convinces women to leave their domestic lives behind and pursue dreams like the enigmatic American dream in a new land.

Sexual Politics by Kate Millett serves as a theoretical support of the time that seeks to understand the nature of gender inequality and the oppression of women. Millett's theory delves into the analysis of power relations between men and women and how these relations shape social structures and institutions. Millett strongly condemns the established power men hold over women, emphasising that it is a social construct rather than an innate or biological basis. She focuses on the imbalanced distribution of power within sexual relationships, highlighting how the patriarchal structure grants men greater freedom and lesser rights to women. Millett views this as a political issue rather than a natural dominance, stating, "The term 'politics' shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."

In the novel *Abra*, Joan Barfoot skillfully addresses this sexual politics by challenging traditional gender roles. Barfoot realises that breaking the social power distribution requires acts of insubordination. So, she portrays her protagonist, Abra, as someone who tried to minimise the political control imposed on women through her

unconventional decision to live in a remote location. In this newfound freedom, Abra embraces unlimited autonomy and experiences a revitalised sense of power. Abra's fighting spirit mirrors the attitude seen in the pursuit of the American dream, where Europeans migrated to a new land to escape from the bondage of the past, however, for them it became a nightmare, for Abra it is a complete freedom.

Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst renowned for his contributions to analytical psychology, introduced the concept of the "Hero Archetype." According to Jung, this archetype represents the quest and battle necessary for a hero to achieve their goals. He defines the hero as a manifestation of the human libido, which he describes as an "energy-value which is able to communicate itself to any field of activity whatsoever, be it power, hunger, hatred, sexuality or religion, without ever being itself a specific interest." Jung often associated heroes with the characteristic of wanderers, or explorers, individuals who embark on journeys of self-discovery and transformation. Abra's journey reflects the heroic quest described by Jung, as she seeks her own liberation and fulfillment despite the predefined gender roles imposed by society. She embraces this heroic quality after breaking herself free from the confined roles of wife and mother. By escaping from the little world that restricted her, she distances herself from human contact, clocks, and mirrors and embraces a life in close communion with nature. Abra embodies the spirit of the hero archetype, navigating a path of personal growth and discovery. Her connection with nature serves as a vital element in her quest, enabling her to reclaim her authentic self and find true freedom.

A central theme in the novel is the power struggle of women as wives or mothers in traditional domestic life while asserting their freedom and resisting patriarchal norms and expectations. Abra, as the central character, embodies this struggle, striving to establish her independence and autonomy despite familial and societal pressures. Abra's journey allows her to break free from the influence of her husband, gaining her own identity and embracing freedom. Abra's power struggle includes the inability to make important decisions in the household, a primary struggle faced by her. As a housewife and mother,

she was unable to make decisions independently, but through her newfound freedom, she discovers a sense of agency. She says

“I would drink my coffee and smoke my cigarettes and wonder when I should stand up and when I stood, what should I do, which direction should I turn, which room should I go to, and I would have another coffee and try to decide. Everything seemed very bright, and at the same time hazy. I was alert to sounds, smells, and everything was unreal, as if I were not a part of it; or as if I were only that, a part of it like a couch or lamp. (67)

Abra’s choices in decorating her home demonstrates her liberation because she was not allowed to decide anything at her husband’s house even on petty matters. Now, each decoration at her stone house becomes an expression of her experiences and personal growth, revealing her unity with the environment and her rejection of societal expectations. She says,

“each one, when I look closely, calls up that same mysterious intensity of concentration, the same sense of being what I see. . . . now it is possible to feel the unity with subtleties of colour. I see each of them; I am each of them. What is on the walls is my experience here; they are what happened to me. I know that anyone coming in would not see that, but they were not done for the outside. (145)

The novel also sheds light on the complexities of women’s relationships, including friendships, rivalries, and mother-daughter dynamics. These relationships are often shaped by patriarchal norms and power centres, leading to tension and conflict. Abra has felt herself lost even when she was surrounded by family members, neighbors, and friends. This is because of the patriarchal construct has not granted equal power distribution within the family structure and social structure, causing women to lose their sense of self. Abra’s realisation of her state of no-autonomy is revealed in these lines:

“What was I thinking about then, I wonder? What was I feeling? Where was the “I” in all that? I was the lover, the giver, the doer, the mother, the wife, and that is where the “I” was. Which makes me sound martyred, only of course it wasn’t like that. I didn’t think of it that way; in fact, I cannot remember that I thought or felt, anything about

myself, except that I loved these people and they depended on me.”

Notably, the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel showcases the challenges and struggles embedded within these connections. Even when Abra’s daughter finds her after a long search, Abra remains unwilling to return to her old life, reflecting the complexities of mother-daughter relationship. At first, she is tempted to return, however, she couldn’t break her convention that warranted complete autonomy. If she had returned to her family, the 15 years of exile would have brought a failure in her questful journey. Thus, she has withheld her completely empowered state and autonomy without being conquered by anyone in her life.

The novel exposes Abra’s courage in fighting against marginalisation and exclusion of women from positions of power and influence due to their vulnerability to violence and abuse. In fact, Abra embodies resilience and determination as an empowered woman towards gaining her psychological upliftment by breaking the patriarchal norms. She can be compared to the biblical character Eve, who defied God’s ‘Will’ towards her quest for self-knowledge and set herself a way of transformation. Additionally, Abra’s unconventional choices and geographic relocation may sometimes represent a similar or a reversal of the biblical events, such as creating her own garden of Eden without the need of a male partner. However, she decided not to look back, with no memories or nostalgia. She even considers living in harmony with nature doesn’t require elements like beautifying oneself and believes to secure power in the wilderness. In order to obtain power to survive despite challenges, she considers forgoing beauty, fear and other aspects that carry the bondage of the past, saying, “came from somewhere else, from other people, that it wasn’t part of me or of this pace” (136). Therefore, she never cares about her hairstyle and other beautifying aspects. She says, “I hacked at it (the hair), almost angry, and it came away in great chunks. I could feel that it was uneven... it didn’t matter” (113). Thus, her newfound home symbolises the garden of Eden, selfhood, personal fulfillment, empowerment, and complete autonomy.

Barfoot portrays how the patriarchal norms normalize and justify violence and abuse against women even in domestic life. Women are made to accept such invincible suppression in the name of family structure and modesty, where no women could escape from such suppression. Abra's violation of such norms has highlighted and made everyone aware of the gendered nature of power relations, illustrating how women are often marginalised and excluded from positions of influence at the micro level in society. The invincible suppression has been exposed through her deliberate action of renouncement, helping her get her self-esteem and liberation. She says that she has never experienced feeling at home because of the lack of power and identity, and experienced only suppressed feelings. She says,

"I heard the birds, looked at the flowers, but always I was separate from them, someone listening and looking. I do not know when the distinction disappeared, but it must not have been for a very long time. Not until I became a part of it, which is a different thing from feeling at home." (13)

In the various geographical settings, Abra has experienced different levels of freedom throughout the novel. Notably, she experiences a profound sense of liberation and complete freedom in her wilderness in a stone cottage with no mirrors or clocks, cultivating vegetables, and surviving all alone. In the conventional and domestic setting, she experienced neither contentment nor discontentment, where she was expected to adhere to modesty and tradition, with limited power and agency. However, due to her transitions to different locations, Abra gains independence, and control. Abra no longer sees the central city from where she departed as the focal point. Instead, she views her newly established home as the true centre of her existence. Her solitary life when leading a life close to nature has boosted her strong mental health that she was daring enough to face any new challenges of life. And also proved that union with nature makes a person stronger and self-reliant, and not dependent on others.

John Milton portrays Satan as hero in the opening part of his epic poem "Paradise Lost" where Satan delivers a heroic speech in hell, describing the making up of one's mind.

"We shall be free; th' Almighty hat not built
 Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
 Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce
 To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
 Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n,"
 (237-241)

This is how Abra decides to reign in her stone house rather than serve in her husband's house.

The novel explores the significance of one's presence or absence and how it shapes different perspectives. Margaret Atwood once referred to the "blanket area north of the map," revealing America's perception of Canada. Similarly, Abra's disappearance in the novel does not imply her absence; instead, she remains active in a remote location unknown to others. One aspect of keeping her away from the contact of others develops attention towards herself. However, negative emotions also peak, and she says, "Do I exist when there [s no one here to see me existing'... it seemed that the answer was no" (69). It reveals that she escapes from the social stereotypes that controlled her. Abra's literal disappearance keeps her away from individual contacts from people and society, not as a failure but as a spiritual and psychological upliftment. Like saints renouncing their personal wishes and desires and embracing a life with the divine source. Like monks living in the monasteries following religious discipline, living simple and humble life, bestowing them spiritual upliftment. Similar is the case with Abra, who acquires simplicity, spirituality, and a sense of empowerment.

Barfoot's argument in the novel emphasises the necessity of individual identity, respect, and freedom at the level of family and society. At times, only an unusual decision alone could challenge the well-established socio-political powers imposed by patriarchy. The centre of power is counterattacked by her protagonist. Through the subversive actions of the protagonist, the centrality is reversed. The pseudo-wilderness environment at the margins or edge of civilization becomes central to the novel, resulting in an inversion of societal norms. As a feminist counter-attack, men are marginalised, and Abra's life without a male partner is enriched by her deep connection with nature, securing freedom. She has marginalized her husband by abandoning him.

This substitution serves as a political assault on the patriarchy.

In conclusion, Joan Barfoot's novel "Abra" is a powerful feminist work that explores the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. It delves into various feminist themes, including gender inequality, power relations, and patriarchy. Through its insightful critique of patriarchal norms and values, the novel sheds light on their impact on women's counteractions. Barfoot's protagonist has well established the period's feminist spirit and its consequences.

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