

Recent Trends of Woman in Modernism the Legacies of Risk Possibility

¹Vipin Singh & ²Dr. Puran Singh

¹Research Scholar, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan (India)

²Professor, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan (India)

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ABSTRACT

This introductory essay for the Australian Feminist Studies special issue on Modernist Women and Risk examines the changing fortunes of risk for feminist aesthetic and political work. It considers how risk in the work of modernist women intellectuals, writers and artists prompts us to imagine what it might mean in the twenty-first century to 'risk anything'? The pervasive association of 'risk' with a neoliberal agenda of individual responsibility and the calculated governance of our everyday micro-pathologies might well suggest that the concept of risk is now far removed from the aesthetic and political ethos of modernism. Premised on the idea of novelty, uncertainty, disruption, and reinvention, risk, for modernism represented an almost indispensable condition of creative production although risk in the work and lives of modernist women, let alone queer modernist women, presents another layer of complexity to the broader contours of modernist experimentation, since the very condition of creative production was in itself a gendered enterprise in the early decades of the twentieth century: ideologically, aesthetically and materially. As we have moved to ever more liquid forms of modernity, risk is no longer associated with an automatic negation and tearing down as the precondition for social, political and aesthetic renewal. Rather risk has become something to be managed via the rhetoric of individual harm and grievance as a bulwark against endemic uncertainty and precarity. The liquidity of our world, felt through super diversity, intensified forms of digital communication, financialisation, and the new challenges that they pose, has meant that we are all now risk adverse rather than risk-takers in ways that Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck perhaps never imagined. With this in mind, the historical valency of risk in relation to modernist women's literary, artistic, and intellectual enterprises might be a surprisingly fertile optic with which to not simply scour the extant ruins of modernism, but to illuminate the fortunes and legacies of 'risk' for feminist political and intellectual work in the present.

1. Introduction

'New modernist studies' has grappled with the anodyne institutionalization of the very risk that so readily attached itself to modernist experimentation, its interrogation of 'bad modernisms' often played out as sibling rivalry, with the agile, attention-seeking younger upstart destined to eclipse the conscientious, and somewhat earnest first born. But beyond the terms of good and bad modernisms, old and new modernist studies, the idea of risk as a critical or emancipatory category has, in the early twenty-first century, lost something of its pizzazz. In striking ways, risk has come to be supplanted by a 'trauma culture' that has rendered psychic pain one of the dominant discourses of political and aesthetic culture in the postwar period. Trauma culture's more recent mutation into the 'micro-aggression' and a 'call out' culture surely serves to further tame political or aesthetic risk, while at times coming dangerously close to a 'master morality'. As Brown's cautionary tale about the dangers of 'identity as injury' showed us, 'wounded attachments' all too easily fix identity in ways that foreclose agile political opposition and self-determination, individual or collective.

The modernist feminism produced by Katherine Mansfield, Mina Loy, Emma Goldman and others in the early decades of the twentieth century, was inflected with a quasi-Nietzschean individualism that stressed exceptional strengths of character

and mind, while being deeply suspicious of a discourse of rights, with its ontological essentialism ('I am') closing off a more expansive discourse of freedom ('I want this for us'). Feminist modernists, in their pursuit of new forms of aesthetic and political freedom were acutely aware of the paradoxes of risk, paradoxes which for Brown have increasingly come to make us uncomfortable and anxious:

The pursuit of political freedom is necessarily ambivalent ... because it requires that we surrender the conservative pleasure of familiarity, insularity, and routine for investment in a more open horizon of possibility and sustained willingness to risk identity, both collective and individual.

While Brown penned her critique of freedom and political rights more than two decades ago, her insights are acutely prescient if not indicative of a longer history of feminism's struggle with the ways in which feminist political work risks reifying the very structures and identities it otherwise contests. Emma Goldman perhaps typified this kind of risk of collective and individual identity, forging her political career via a form of anarchist feminism that defies ready-made feminist categories, then and now. And an intimate life forged through her advocacy of free love and a repudiation of monogamy, in spite of the unruly reality of her 'uncontrollable passions', which have come to either represent the 'failure' of her political vision or its domestication. As Clare Hemmings (2018) astutely notes,

sexual freedom in these terms represents 'a volatile site of uncertain promise, a place of inevitably flawed struggle for newness that may precisely be its political value and enduring appeal', something she claims Goldman knew all too well. Opening this special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies*, guest editors Louise Mayhew and Helen Rydstrand explore risk at the site of scholarly engagement, eschewing the formal address of the academic essay in place of the personalised, vernacular intimacy of a conversation. While the ficto-critical mode has a strong legacy in feminist and cultural studies scholarly work, the conversation format here reminds us of the importance of intellectual pleasure derived from the intimacy of scholarly friendship and the exchange of ideas. It is a formal experiment in dialogue that avoids the strained solipsism of self-narration (sometimes a risk in ficto-critical writing) or the implicit hierarchies of expertise of traditional academic forms of writing, and celebrates instead the shared attachments and perils that mark the process of collaboration, whether through the thrill of the *objet trouvé* driving intellectual research or the destabilising uncertainties of the doctoral experience. Bringing together the sentimental and the scholarly, the point of departure for this conversation (and friendship) is the gift of a feminist poster, one that memorializes the legacy of risk across generations of feminist creative and intellectual work.

While the personal has been and remains an important mode of feminist political intervention, the personal also now risks being co-opted into a neoliberal individualism that rewards self-promotion and a 'lean-in' ethos targeted at personal gain or indeed a 'call-out' culture that seeks social change via forms of tribalism at the expense of coalition building around broad socio-political structural reform. The feminist poster collectives that thrived in the 1970s and 80s, of which *Harridan Screen* printers are exemplary, reveal the feminist collective as an important political tool that managed to combine feminist conviction, creative labour, and a sense of humour. We glimpse something of this shared labour of political and creative enterprise in Mayhew and Rydstrand's conversation; each speaks for the self through an awareness of the other, or rather the perspective (personal and disciplinary) that colours feminist scholarship as a generative dialogue. The conversation form here also pays homage to the innovative methods of feminist and queer research – oral histories, archival research, interviews, anecdote – that bring us closer to our object of study if not animating feminist history itself, as an imagined dialogue between the past and present.

Risk for modernist women invariably involved going against the grain of both aesthetic and professional norms. In Catherine Speck's consideration of the work of the wartime artists, the American, Edna Reindel and the Australian, Sybil Craig, the risk of belatedness hovers over the work of these artists, by virtue of working in a realist mode against the rage for late modernist abstraction. As professionally employed war artists recording the wartime work of women in the traditionally masculine domains of aircraft and munitions factories and shipbuilding, Speck reveals how our received art histories rarely capture the composite material conditions (in this case the exigencies of war and women's newfound professional roles in traditionally masculine domains) that shaped art practices beyond the often retrospective categories of period style. Through the reframing of the work of Reindel and Craig as 'inter/modern', Speck draws out the complexity of

aesthetic style, of both of these artists, beyond its presumed 'realist' surface. Speck's framework thus complicates how we read their images, independent of, and perhaps against the grain of, a 'specular military economy of visibility' that might otherwise miss the political efficacy of their work. Like Reindel and Craig, Gretel AdornoneéKarplus finds herself among a world of men, where professional life involved serving the Frankfurt School's critical endeavours as secretary along with the demands of ill-health and loneliness. In Tamlyn Avery's essay, Gretel Adorno is both 'sacrificial lamb' and perceptive amanuensis, holding together the intellectual threads of the Institute of Social Research and the domestic affairs of the Adorno's home office, which, after the Institute's move to L.A. attracted a steady flow of émigré visitors. And if Adorno's exacting standards of hospitality in *Minima Moralia* are anything to go by, the pressures of domestic conviviality would have been onerous (1951/2005). In spite of Karplus's avowed dislike of housework, for Avery, this is no 'vicarious career'; instead it is a form of secretarial labour that helped to shape the production of the Frankfurt School's work in meaningful ways. In revisiting overlooked 'writers' (Avery's term) such as Karplus, and in restoring the figure of the secretary to her rightful place in twentieth century textual labour history, Avery positions Gretel Karplus as 'a beacon radiating over the complex social relations that reside in the "shadows" of individual genius in acts of writing'. While Karplus certainly complicates the gendered divisions of textual labour that relegate secretarial function to perfunctory usefulness, Avery's essay prompts us to wonder about her intellectual ambition beyond making 'fair copy' for Adorno and co. A feminist engagement with an imaginary archive of Karplus's intellectual ambition might remind us of the limitations of Marxist theory's powers of resurrection, having failed to fully rescue Gretel from the 'shadows' of Adorno's footnotes and acknowledgements.

2. Woman in Modernism

Modernism embraced the issues of class, gender, the struggle for knowledge, and the senselessness and alienation of the time. The movement was a response to an international sense of depression, the helpless feeling held by many at that time that nothing was concrete or reliable anymore. It dealt with the way human personality seemed to change, as Virginia Woolf once stated in 1910, and it embraced disruption and rejection to move beyond the simplistic. Gender issues have always been a topic in society as well as in literature, so naturally gender became a major focus of the modernist movement. Women, their intelligence and their judgment had always been regarded with contempt by a male-oriented society (Marsden). Women had been seen and treated more as complements to the men in their lives than as individuals or spiritual entities; they were depicted in literature as womanly, weak, dutiful, and stupid. Most authors continued to write with the misguided perception that women were always inferior to men. For centuries, women were defined by men; the world was male-centered and male-dominated. Male philosophers and social theorists were the ones who identified woman with disorder, savagery, chaos, unreason, and the excluded "other." According to James Branch Cabell women were considered nothing more than conveniences; they were useful for keeping a household as well as for copulation and pleasure. Hegel describes womankind as the "eternal irony of the community,"

and Freud defines it as “the implacable enemy of civilization” (qtd. in Glasgow). Theory, logic, and order were considered to be masculine traits, the opposite of femininity. In her article “Feminism,” Ellen Glasgow states that “in the past men have confidently asserted that woman exists not as an active agent of life but merely as a passive guardian of the life force and that it is nature’s purpose that woman sit and watch.” The philosopher Schopenhauer claims that one needs only to look at a woman in order to realize that she is not intended for great mental or physical labor. Schopenhauer goes as far as to state that women are childish, silly, and short-sighted; he does not acknowledge women as human, but instead implies that men are the only fully human beings and that women exist on a plane somewhere between them and children (qtd. in Glasgow). Evil is another trait that has been attributed to women for centuries, a characteristic that dates back to the Biblical allusion of Eve’s temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Until the early twentieth-century, these traits and characteristics were all considered feminine and women were portrayed and treated accordingly.

In 1912, Mary Coolidge asked whether the characteristic behavior described as feminine is in fact an inalienable quality or merely an attitude of mind produced by the coercive social habits of past eras. After she carefully studied societies which stress gender differences from infancy and compared them to primitive societies where men and women were mostly equal in status she concluded that it is the stressing of these differences, the imposing of values and traits rather than inherent biological characteristics, which is responsible for perceptions of “the feminine.” Coolidge suggests that it is civilized man who has molded woman according to his standards and desires: “A successful woman must be what man approved of,” and for that reason women have always conformed to the standards set for them (85). Coolidge further postulates that it is because women are never given the opportunity to act as they feel, because all traits and characteristics not in line with the feminine are suppressed and perverted from infancy, that “the womanly woman” stereotype was created with its excessive dependence on men for support and guidance (90). Writing as late as 1935, Dr. Adler, a Viennese psychologist, agrees with Coolidge that “there is absolutely no biological basis for the inferiority of women” (“Idea of Women’s”). Adler, like Coolidge, holds men instead of women accountable for the feminine myth. Adler sees women’s inferiority as “fictitious invention of the male sex” and claims that women are made “to feel that they are not at the level with men from the very beginning” (“Idea of Women’s”). Adler makes the valid point that this myth of feminine inferiority is so strong that it will take women a long time truly become free of it and declare their independence. Dora Marsden, after carefully examining the same issue in her article “Bondwomen,” also concludes that femininity and women’s inferiority are a social construct. Yet she claims that this is not necessarily due to the downgrading of women by men because “it is not possible for an outer force to give or take away freedom, it is born in the individual’s soul” (Marsden). Marsden suggests that the perceived inferiority of women exists because some women instinctively see themselves as inferior and have accepted this inferiority without question. These women seek comfort and protection, they long to be at the side of a man, and it is for that reason that women in male dominated cultures have been

willing to sacrifice their image and identity for centuries. Since femininity is only a construct and not an underlying fact, Marsden claims it can be deconstructed. To unravel the myths of femininity women must choose to feel a sense of equality, that women can be fully independent of the men in their lives. Ellen Glasgow has similar notions. She suggests that the years of false stereotyping of women by men have bred in many the dangerous habit of applying these misconceptions to themselves. They have denied their own humanity for so long and with so much earnestness that they have come to believe in the truth of this denial. The deconstruction of traditional views of women is a challenge not only because it is so established in male-dominated culture but also because women have often shown such an eagerness to conform to the ideals of men that they have defied nature and reshaped both their minds and their bodies after the model placed before them. Glasgow is in agreement with Coolidge when she suggests that this apparent passivity is not inherent but acquired, that it “is obliged therefore to disappear in the higher development of the race.” Glasgow, much like Marsden, believes that a woman’s identity is formed by her willing acceptance of society’s norms. The turn of the century and its many changes, industrialization in particular, gave a number of women the chance to work outside of the home. According to Coolidge, “not a few” of these women were able to use their inherent intelligence and started to question and defy the traditional place of woman in western society (85). As time progressed a gradual change took place and “the new woman” emerged between the two world wars. One of the major aims of this modern woman was economic and financial independence. This type of freedom brought with it other rights: to choose whether to marry or remain single, to obtain work positions, the right of sexual expression and so much more. What was most important for “the new woman” was intellectual freedom; women were looking for self-realization, for the ability to use their intellectual abilities and talents to find themselves and their true identity. Needless to say this new woman became not only a threat to male-dominated societies but also a great source of material for the writers of the time. As a result of the new feminist movement, literature of the modernist period often depicts the female as an individual who insists on her right to have a career or a family, or both, depending on her individual choices and desires. The “new woman” in literature is depicted as one who “emphasizes the identity of interests that all human beings have. While she recognizes the diversity involved in true equality, she sees that the diversity isn’t necessarily on the sex-lines but on the lines of what each individual has to contribute to society” (West 14). The “new woman” was far from perfect and some of her aspirations and behavioral patterns were far from admirable, but much of this, according to June West, was simply “a result of woman’s not being accustomed yet to freedom of choice” (14).

Although many changes are seen in the way women are portrayed in modernist literature—and the “new woman” can certainly be detected page after page—many male writers were unable to let go of the old, established, feminine view of female characters. Tradition was still too strong and the “womanly woman” remained an important literary figure alongside this “new woman.” William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Ernest Hemingway’s “*Snows of Kilimanjaro*,” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* offer examples of how this new

feminist view coupled with the old view of woman in modernist literature. It is practically impossible to read "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and not notice the influence that modernism has had on Hemingway and his work. He clearly acknowledges the rapid changes that have taken place in society and the way these changes have affected women and their status. His story attributes the character Helen with traits common to the new woman, though he struggles with his acceptance of the freedom and change in status that this new woman signifies. The hold that tradition has on Hemingway, and other writers of the time, is just too great; as Adler states, the feminine myth is so strong it will take more time to break it. Hemingway first introduces his reader to Helen as a caring, nurturing, motherly type of woman; she is concerned about her husband, Harry, whose leg is injured, and about his physical and emotional comfort. She takes on a very traditional, maternal role and she is portrayed as somewhat naïve and single-minded when she denies the reality that Harry will die. Hemingway strengthens the traditional aspect of Helen through Harry's responses to her nurturing behavior. He apparently does not respect Helen or her thoughts; he accuses her of calling him names, calls her "a bloody fool," disrespects her opinion and disregards her wishes when he has Bwana fetch him a drink she thinks will be bad for him. Yet within this same conversation between Harry and Helen, the reader is given a clue that she may not be as traditional as she first appears, especially after Harry alludes to the fact that this woman and "her bloody money" have supported him (Hemingway 1985). A traditional relationship would have had Harry supporting Helen and, with this role reversal, Hemingway addresses the fact that Helen's financial support has not only allowed Harry to become slack in his writing but that it is also the reason for Harry's resentment of Helen; he feels threatened by his dependence on her. In their next conversation Harry again shows total disrespect for his wife, and, keeping with the traditional treatment of women from that time, he makes it clear that he sees her as an inferior. As he meditates on their relationship, he first holds her accountable for his misfortune, as well as his death as an artist, but he quickly comes to realize that it is he and not she who is to blame. She is a good woman, a woman who loves him "as a writer, as a man, as a companion and as a proud possession" (1989). His new opinion of Helen is very modernist. Her opinion of him as a "proud possession" is in clear opposition to traditional relationships in which the woman was held as the man's possession, in which the wife is always subordinate to her husband. In one scene Hemingway presents the reader with a completely modernist view of Helen, a total role reversal: "She had gone to kill some meat and, knowing how he liked to watch the game, she had gone well away so she would not disturb this little pocket of the plain that he could see. She was always thoughtful, he thought. On anything she knew about, or had read, or that she had ever heard" (1988). In the past it was the man's role to be the provider, to be thoughtful enough of his wife to care for and protect her. Hemingway even portrays Helen in a manly manner when she comes back into camp "wearing jodhpurs and carrying a rifle" (1989). As Harry continues to reflect on his wife he comes to the realization that what she most wanted was "someone that she respected with her" (1989), a desire very characteristic of the new woman. Harry realizes that "she had acquired him" (1989); she built him a new life, and he traded his old one for security. Traditionally,

it had always the woman who traded in "her life" for the security and protection a man would provide for her. As Harry continues to reminisce about his wife and becomes aware of her modernist traits, it appears that the hold that tradition and the feminine myth has on Hemingway prompts him to display her womanly traits again and blur those long-held associations with those of the new woman. In the middle of Harry's struggle with death Helen is preoccupied with the way she thinks things ought to be, the way she wants things to be and with trivial, superficial things. As death comes for Harry, Helen dreams about Long Island, her father and her daughter's debut. Hemingway clearly identifies the change in female status throughout this story. He firmly acknowledges that men were attracted to modern women yet feared the change and challenge presented by these women. These men are unable to let go of the womanly woman of the past, of that long-established view of femininity. Hemingway continuously blurs the line between the feminine and feminist, not only in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" but in many of his other works as well.

3. Women Modernists of Risk

At the heart of many of women modernists and those in their wake, risk troubles the very conditions of artistic and intellectual production, a sobering corrective to high modernism's presumed (masculine) claims to originality and genius. But women modernists also had to contend with the fragile gains of early twentieth century feminism. Writing with raw conviction against the rise of fascism in *Three Guineas* (1938/2001), Virginia Woolf contemplated the threat to women's newfound political agency and social independence in the context of heightened nationalism and rising totalitarianism:

Let us never cease from thinking – what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men? (175)

Although Woolf's feminism was always a complicated balancing act between her political sympathies for women's rights and a concern for her literary reputation untainted by the kind of reductive logic Wittig addresses in relation to Barnes, *Three Guineas* is an angry indictment of the fear and psychic violence that connects the subordination of women within patriarchy to the subordination of the mass political subject of fascism – it is her most daring feminist work. Whilst acknowledging masculine authoritarianism as the conduit between patriarchy and fascism, the risk Woolf wages in this essay is feminist refusal: of the systems of patronage that traditionally kept women out of higher education (she declined the invitation to deliver the Clarke lectures at Cambridge in 1932) or indeed any act that leads to 'the desire to impose "our" civilisation or "our" dominion upon other people' (202).

4. Conclusion

The recent rise of totalitarianism, reactionary populism, nativism, intensified forms of racism alongside a 'free' market cannibalising almost every aspect of the public and private domains of our world, has rendered the idiom of 'risk' in these terms almost un-recognizable, and yet uncannily potent. While Woolf's politics of refusal eschews the attitude of victimhood that comes with oppression ('identity as injury'), the challenge

Woolf identifies here is to seize agency without the mantle of mastery and superiority. At a time of increased pessimism about the emancipatory possibilities of art, and in an era of neoliberal individualism that encourages forms of individual 'grievance culture' (or Nietzschean 'reactive feelings') that deliberately or unwittingly occlude broad platforms for social justice, the idea of risk (in the lives and work of women modernists) must represent more than a retrospective gesture that laments an idealised heroic past. If we are to develop new political languages of responsiveness that meet the challenges of 'Neoliberalism's Frankenstein' (wounded, revengeful, and seemingly all-powerful), we may need 'experimental combinations and juxtapositions of theorists and disciplines

long been held apart by vigilantly policed orthodoxies'. In this context what might political theorists or legal scholars learn from the ferocity of Woolf's repudiation of all forms of belligerency in *Three Guineas* or indeed what might feminist scholars discover from her palpable discomfort and ambivalence as she struggles to articulate the meaning of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism for feminism? While our times are inexorably different although in some ways recognisably similar, the work of women modernists do not represent what Hemmings has identified as a 'lost feminism' but rather part of the contested and uneven narrative of feminist history that compels us to think about what is at stake for feminism in the present.

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