
UNIT 6 FEMINIST CONCERNS IN FIELDING

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to acquaint you with the question of marriage as a social institution in *Tom Jones*. You will see that marriage in the eighteenth century England was used extensively to subjugate women in a framework that took its commands from economic interests. You will also realise that women evolved their own specific strategies to counter the male onslaught through marriage. What is going to particularly impress you is that Fielding views his women characters with great sympathy and understanding.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Fielding is one of the most pro-woman writers in English fiction. Isn't it amazing? This is substantially because he is not merely a keen observer of reality but also one who recognises and accepts people as they are. This means that he doesn't wish to impose his views on them. His moralist bias is expressed in terms of opinion and conviction but not in terms of representation in fiction. As we notice, he allows his characters to tread their own individual paths. For instance, if Fielding finds the women of his day indulging in sexual liberties recklessly, he would go critically into the larger phenomenon than say that the specific women be castigated and punished. More, Fielding sees most libertinous tendencies among women as matters of nature's assertion — suggesting that this is how women behave in actual life and that, therefore, they should be appreciated for their spontaneity and uninhibitedness in sex. In fact, Fielding would have been harsh towards them if they went against spontaneous and uninhibited behaviour. This is the essence of Fielding's comic genius and realism.

6.2 MARRIAGE AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

Talking of the women represented in *Tom Jones*, we can usefully focus on the institution of marriage. Marriage, as Fielding sees it, is a socio-economic alliance between males and females. Think how and why the two Blifil brothers scheme their marriage with Miss Bridget Allworthy. Think of Tom. His intimacy with Sophia would not get sanction because the marriage between the two would not qualify on socio-economic grounds. On the other hand, the young Blifil, the likely inheritor of Mr. Allworthy's fortune, would be

considered the most suitable boy for Sophia, irrespective of the fact that he does not love her and she on her side strongly and clearly hates him.

The term "socio-economic alliance" for marriage is a broad one. What actually comes into practice in marriage is the conduct-code. Under this code, particularly, the woman loses all identities as a human being – the specific name, the station, the right to decision-making, an activist participation in given situations, etc. Fielding has observed that the conduct-code of marriage suppresses women's spontaneity more than that of men – the difference can be seen in the example of Squire Western and his wife. The latter died early in life largely because she as a wife could see no scope of true relationship with her husband under what came to be called a marriage.

However, outside marriage women behave freely to the extent of being aggressive. **First**, they do not merely 'flirt,' but actually seduce men and lead them straight to bed. If Squire Western is shown as a great hunter in the novel, Molly Seagrim has been shown no less as a fighter and marauder. **Secondly**, the philosopher spotted in Molly's bed by Tom arouses in us a sense of ridicule and disgust – his practice goes against his precept as he sheepishly reveals himself in a state of undress. Not Molly. In her case, it is raw sexuality. Though her own mother and sisters as well as the neighbourhood do not approve of her ways, Fielding is far from critical towards her. Another version of female sexuality – pleasure-giving and natural – is presented through Jenny Jones. Tom has also come of age by the time he meets her and we notice greater reciprocity between the two. What we scarcely notice, however, is that under Fielding's scheme, such reciprocity is not witnessed between partners in marriage. Instead, we see wives running away from husbands and husbands in hot pursuit of them – they have to get back their wives into the marriage-mould. Thus, female-sexuality and marriage stand in contrast to each other. Does it not have its basis in Fielding's attitude towards women?

6.2.1 Tom's Affinity with Women

Tom's own sexuality is equally uninhibited and pronounced. But we have to recognise that he shares this trait more with women than men. **Firstly**, he learnt about its existence from Molly, a woman conceived outside the family or marriage-mould. His sympathy and kindness towards all women has its source in his sense of gratefulness to both Molly and Jenny Jones. Tom has that softness, sentimentality and considerateness in his nature which women have nurtured in him. No other male in *Tom Jones* is like Tom in this respect.

We should also consider that no male, apart from Tom, has what can truly be called sexuality. In Mr. Allworthy, there is a great deal of intellectual toughness and stamina. He also has deep sentiments as we notice in the last book of the novel. But he is not the man to communicate with a woman on equal terms in a relationship. Squire Western has a passion only for hunting. Square and Thwackum are not capable of realising the true nature of sexuality. For Blifil, a woman is a mere object of sex. See the way he fantasises about Sophia in moments of solitude. Sophia appears to him in his dreams as someone who has a body passively responding to male assault.

Fielding's approach to the question of true female sexuality is exploratory and highly subtle. Sexuality in the case of Sophia is shown as evolving into a kind of bliss through a great deal of fears, uncertainties as well as longings for a companion who would follow a different conduct-code than the one normally encountered. But she is definitely for a *code*, not a free play of the impulse. What can this different code be? Sophia doesn't have an answer to this question. But she knows, and her knowledge is based on acute observation, that raw nature and total spontaneity by themselves would lead humans nowhere. Tom also has gradually realised this truth. Insofar as positive principles of

sexuality in a given life-frame are concerned, the two have to construct them together. Naturalness would not be negated. Rather, it would be tempered. To be more precise, naturalness is going to be at the centre of all that Sophia and Tom are going to construct in the name of a special code of love-companionship-marriage. Is this possible to attain within the given life-frame? Neither of them is sure. But they would try to evolve it since this effort alone is going to be the basis of their relationship.

6.2.2 The Idea of 'Poaching' in the Novel

While talking about Fielding's feminist concerns, I wish to draw your attention to a few specific areas of human behaviour and sensitivity that emerge in *Tom Jones* as striking. One of these areas is what I prefer to call 'poaching'.

The act of 'poaching' occupies a central place in the novel both in the literal as well as the metaphorical sense. The literal incident of stealth is referred to by Fielding in Book III. In the company of Black George, Tom decides to be active on the land of Squire Western. The shooting of partridges brings to the fore Tom's childish foray into Western's territory. But Tom never killed the birds. The reason why Tom has owned up the crime is that he wants to save Black George from punishment. But this idea of trespassing, intervening and encroaching on someone else's territory is exploited time and again by the author.

Poaching at one level suggests that the private space of an individual is always vulnerable to prying. The novel opens with the whole neighbourhood becoming curious about the identity of Tom's parents, particularly Tom's mother. Begetting Tom was a secret act between two individuals. But the act of which two? Most people in the novel have declared unto themselves that this should not remain a secret. Then, also think of the surveillance under which Sophia is kept till the moment people come to know that she is in love with Tom and wants to marry him. Still further, we see towards the end of the novel that even those among society who belong to the privileged sections move about in parties with faces masked – they are afraid that someone would violate their private space. Operating at various levels of meaning, this active metaphor adds to the richness and complexity of the text.

Fielding's perception of the society as an organic whole enables him to go into the basic aspects of its structure. Is there a clear demarcation between one man's domain and another's? Should a particular man's or woman's space not mean a habitat that has come into being for useful intermingling with others? If that is the case, we should probe the nature of this social intermingling. The author considers it serious that social intermingling in the world of *Tom Jones* soon degenerates into interference and worse.

Let us briefly analyse Fielding's use of the metaphor of 'poaching.' It can be dealt with at three levels – economic, ideological-moral, and in terms of gender.

There are various instances of poaching as social trespass in episodes related to money-matters. I have indicated a few already. The wooing of Bridget Allworthy by various gentlemen like Doctor Blifil, Captain Blifil, Thwackum and Square indicates the lust for money. Similarly, Blifil's attempts throughout the novel to outshine Tom exemplify the desire to absorb Allworthy's estates and property. Fielding's endeavour in the novel is to show how these people illustrate not merely lack of principles. Their being active on someone else's property is an example in miniature of a larger eighteenth century phenomenon where a new set of people, all highly motivated and aggressive, compete for the acquisition of power on the social plane. This economic poaching serves to bring to the fore a society that is acutely conscious of money and class and tries to manipulate things on the basis of this power. Fielding does not specifically pass judgement on

characters. Instead, he investigates loopholes in a certain set of people. This problem is focused on with a view to redefining the conventional relationship within society. What can be a feeling of sharing, compassion and understanding turns into a matter of interception when either 'duty' or right is forgotten. What appears to me most significant in this phenomenon is that it is always the woman who stands at the receiving end of the social onslaught perpetrated to grab property and money-power.

The same idea is explicated in what may be termed as incidents of 'moral/religious poaching' in the text. Thwackum and Square not only try to impel Tom to follow their principles but also prefer Blifil to him in order to have their hold on the power-structure. The same tendency is shown by Squire Western and his sister in their dealings with Sophia. Fielding suggests to the reader that he/she examine these characters carefully. Tom exhibits qualities that the others lack. Tom's generosity, benevolence and tenderness in relationships go radically against the actual life-manoeuvrings in which all males are involved.

This exaltation of a male character over practically all the female characters proves to be an excellent point of entry for questioning Fielding's own ideological stance vis-a-vis the female characters. Is the author biased towards 'man'? Does he, therefore, indulge in 'gender-poaching'? By 'gender-poaching', one means that the novelist considers 'woman' as merely a good device with the help of which he could drive his message home and further his plot. The question certainly remains since Sophia is not seen for a long time in terms of a concrete individual entity with a voice and mind of her own. Her delineation in the novel is along different lines – she asserts herself truly only at the end. One might say that she hardly herself asserts even then. What happens is that she helplessly agrees to make her father happy. Fielding closes the novel on a "comic" note, not a "realistic" one.

Is Fielding trying to present the eighteenth century society as it then existed? Or is he hinting at a universal phenomenon where men always dominated 'woman'? The text doesn't offer answers to these and such other questions. It only presents a number of perspectives – all clashing with one another. For instance, there can be a case of 'gender-poaching' from a strictly feminist point of view. If one pursues the latter then one finds that Fielding is trying to suggest more than one answer to the problem. This modernist characteristic of complexity and multiplicity of voices is indeed an achievement for a novelist who was writing way back. The reader, after seeing Fielding in this light, begins to perceive another kind of 'poaching' that transcends the boundaries of the text and enters the realm of the genre to which *Tom Jones* belongs – "a comic epic poem in prose."

6.3 PREGNANCY IN *TOM JONES*

Pregnancy constitutes an important aspect of the narrative of *Tom Jones*. Pregnancy also affects the lives of women alone – there is no social arrangement that ensures protection and help to pregnant women. It's a different matter that we do not easily notice the hardship caused to women in this respect. If a society were properly organised, the fact of pregnancy would expect both men and women to carry the burden together. Instead, the society in *Tom Jones* subjects women caught in the pregnancy trap to untold miseries and sufferings. In fact, pregnancy becomes an instrument in the hands of the eighteenth century society to subjugate women. When we read *Tom Jones*, we find that Fielding uses pregnancy as a literary device to bring out the social helplessness of women belonging to the different strata.

“Literary device” here includes two levels of working, thematic and structural. The thematic aspect will take us into the moral-critical direction while the structural will enable us to see the presence of pregnancy at the centre of the fictional representation in the novel. We should deal with them separately and then work towards a unified idea of the phenomenon that *Tom Jones* contains within itself. This scheme of interpreting the novel may also throw light on the historical necessities that Fielding lived under as a writer.

Fielding took note of the fact that women remained at the receiving end of the legal and economic stick and that pain, servitude and anguish were the lot of either the poor and dispossessed, or women, or both. Does this immediate context, for Fielding have roots in the longer history of English society? The answer would be a definite yes. Fielding is very fond of going back into history and looking at his social context from there. There are innumerable references to happenings, developments and characters of which Fielding makes a deft use to enlighten the eighteenth century context.

6.3.1 Pregnancy with Bridget in Focus

If *Tom Jones* were to be the story of Bridget Allworthy and her son Tom, it would sharply focus upon the sense of insecurity the women of the day suffered from. We can imagine the mother and son facing criticism from everyone all their lives. Mr. Allworthy may have rendered financial assistance for their upkeep, but he would not approve of the woman’s conduct. See the way Mr. Allworthy thinks of sexual transgression as sinful. His whole terminology is that of a good and sincere Christian.

That Fielding uses the pregnancy of Bridget outside wedlock to heap condemnation on her is an example of his moralist concerns. The fear of likely social condemnation compels Bridget to make that pact with Jenny Jones under which the latter owned up the blame for causing disgrace to her sex and, therefore, had to leave the place. Jenny’s toughness is remarkable in the sense that she keeps her word to Bridget till the very end. But this toughness also reflects upon the intolerance of her society towards women. In this sense, the social hatred for her is also for Bridget who in fact felt more frightened of the possible exposure. Compare this with Molly’s pregnancy. Molly doesn’t much care for the disdain that people would heap upon her for being morally lax. However, the fact is that Tom feels compelled to marry Molly, or he would lose whatever credibility he has at Paradise Hall as a good person.

A still more important aspect of pregnancy is that it has been structured into the very fabric of the novel. Fielding did it consciously. He made Bridget’s pregnancy a precondition for the existence of the protagonist – the novel is the story of a bastard child left by his mother on the bed of Mr. Allworthy in the beginning itself. Whatever happens to Tom is the consequence of his illegitimacy for which a woman’s pregnancy as a natural act is to blame.

For a while, let us free ourselves from the author of *Tom Jones* and look at the novel as a text, as something that embodies a meaning independent of the unity given to it by Fielding. The metaphor of pregnancy can then be applied to the “history” of *Tom Jones* in a new way. How do we take a pregnancy outside wedlock? As already suggested, pregnancy is a natural human act. Summer, the father of Tom, and Bridget spent a great deal of time together at Paradise Hall, fell in love and became physically intimate as a consequence of mutual attraction. The fact of pregnancy, then, isn’t linked with “accident” or chance but warmth of human togetherness. Miss Bridget, not the loveliest of women in *Tom Jones*, experienced love of a kind that no other character in the novel would ever experience. A secret pact between lovers, it had a dignity of its own. It is clear from what we have been told that Bridget remained loath to change this relationship

into a marriage with her lover. Why? No answer to this has been provided in the text. Allworthy tells Jenny:

I confess, I recollect some passages relating to that Summer, which formerly gave me a conceit that my sister had some liking to him. I mentioned it to her for I had such a regard to the young man, as well on his account, as his father's, that I should have willingly consented to a match between them; but she expressed the highest disdain of my unkind suspicion, she called it, so that I never more spoke on the subject (837).

One wonders as to why Bridget "expressed the highest disdain" of Allworthy's suspicion regarding her relationship with Summer. Thus says Jenny of Summer: "a finer man, I must say, the sun never shone upon; for besides the handsomest person I ever saw, he was so genteel, and had so much wit and good breeding" (835). Jenny also lets Allworthy know that Bridget would have told him one day that she was Tom's mother and that she was deeply pleased on seeing Tom so well looked after. Against this background, it doesn't stand to reason that she wished not to marry Summer. Jenny's description of Summer also makes us conscious about the traits Tom has inherited from Summer—"so genteel, and had so much wit and good breeding." Here, "wit" can also signify basic intelligence which Tom had aplenty.

6.3.2 Marriage Critiqued Sharply in Bridget-Summer Alliance

My guess about Bridget not marrying Summer is that her decision fits in with the critique of marriage that the text unfolds at its structural centre. In the context of the mystery surrounding Tom's birth, Jenny comments upon the basic idea of marriage. This is what she says of her own state to Allworthy:

...after much reading on the subject (of marriage), I am convinced that particular ceremonies are only requisite to give a legal sanction to marriage, and have only a worldly use in giving a woman the privilege of a wife; but that she who lives constant to one man, after a solemn private affiance, whatever the world may call her, hath little to charge on her own conscience(841).

The passion behind these words indicates that Jenny's critique of marriage has the writer's concurrence. Even if it were not so, the criticism applies considerably to the fate of most women in the novel. The women in *Tom Jones* appear to constitute a category apart from men. Some of them suffer subjugation through marriage, others defy it in their own individual ways (Miss Western and Lady Bellaston). Jenny is quite sharp in perception since the broad context in which she has spoken these words is that of Bridget who would keep the love-segment of her life free from the marriage-mould. It may be that, Bridget wished to impart a sense of sanctity to her love for a man in her own specific manner by making what can be called a statement against a socially sanctioned alliance. As a consequence, she decided to produce an illegitimate child.

6.3.3 Historical Metaphor of Pregnancy

From pregnancy to begetting an illegitimate child is an area that may encompass not merely the contemporary society but the larger historical epoch in which this phenomenon of woman's assertion reveals itself.

The idea of pregnancy, birth and legitimacy/illegitimacy can be stretched far in *Tom Jones*. I wonder whether woman's association with nature is broadly acceptable in the case of Fielding. We have already considered Bridget's behaviour vis-a-vis Summer as

well as Tom's behaviour vis-a-vis various women. Let us contemplate pregnancy and birth in terms of a natural process. The world of *Tom Jones* changes considerably after Tom's birth. It appears that a new element has been introduced in Somersetshire, that a new seed is to grow in the womb of society from the time of Tom's birth and the tentative acceptance of the responsibility of his upbringing by Mr. Allworthy. The question that always haunts the reader is whether Tom would make his grade in the world he has been thrown into. The initial social hostility towards him becomes understandable to us once we begin to look upon the metaphor this way.

The establishment is characterised by two of its pillars in the novel – Mr. Allworthy and Squire Western— whose estates are adjacent to each other. Mr. Allworthy can get an inheritor only if his sister gets married. Squire Western has only a daughter. This fact also reflects upon their world which cannot move forward on its own and, therefore, shows sign of stagnation and decay. One cannot see much hope in the marriage of their kin – Blifil and Sophia – since Blifil the male is deficient even in the capacity to carry forward Allworthy's perspective of benevolence and age-old virtue. On her side, Sophia is to passively wait for someone really dynamic to join her.

This is, however, not to suggest that women stand for nature alone while men invariably symbolise mind or consciousness in the novel. Fielding is quite insistent on showing Miss Western as an aggressive propagandist and Sophia as a tough thinker. As we notice in the last book, Sophia matches Mr. Allworthy well in argument.

In him, Tom also has a generous dose of nature (Tom's impulse denotes only that) which is indifferent to principles of society. An innocent and good-hearted youth, Tom is always brave and forthright. There is total absence of hypocrisy in him which is his most appealing aspect. It is this which endears him to the women in the novel perhaps because women are found hypocritical only under duress – they have to be on the right side of male-dominated vested interests that they could preserve themselves. Looked at this way, Tom's joining with Sophia in marriage becomes a necessity for society to reinvigorate itself. Their marriage symbolises the possibility of a new trend taking root in the prevailing society – a trend that can effectively challenge the outmoded ways of the aristocracy. It can also put up the nature-society clash in which society would be cleansed of its ideological dross.

6.4 LET US SUM UP

I admit that this argument is abstract and may even look far-fetched. However, my purpose in explaining an area of the novel in such terms is to make you aware of a paradigm that does exist in Fielding. I started by saying Fielding is one of the most pro-woman writers in English. Do such aspects as "poaching" and "female sexuality" not allow us to build up a thesis that goes against male-domination and the edifice of hypocrisy in eighteenth century English society?

6.5 GLOSSARY

Feminist : The person who supports the cause of women in a male-dominated society. The feminist view also underlines the need for evolving an alternative woman-oriented viewpoint.

Private Space : Underscores respect for a person's individuality which is outside the domain of social viewing. The eighteenth century seemed by and large averse to this idea.

Historical Metaphor : Representation of characters/situations in such a manner that it draws the reader's attention strongly to important changes in history.

6.7 QUESTIONS

1. Fielding is not as sympathetic towards women as he is towards men. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
2. Would it be correct to say that in *Tom Jones*, Fielding considers marriage a mere socio-economic arrangement under which women feel continuously suppressed? Discuss.