



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Emerging Voices: A Sociological Exploration of Anne Bradstreet's Select Works

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New England Puritanism is typically linked with a patriarchal structure and strict social norms. Puritan authorities promoted the avoidance of all pleasures in life, idealizing a life of purity and devotion, which led to a disdain for imagination and emotion. Puritan culture was antagonistic to personal autonomy, valuing poetry only if it praised God. Women occupied a subjugated role in society and, as the so-called "weaker sex," were forbidden from openly expressing their pent-up emotions. Anyone who defied these norms was labelled as deviant or insane. In a society that punished Anne Hutchinson for overstepping her prescribed gender role, there was no space for a female writer. Anne Bradstreet's remarkable achievements stand out when viewed against the historical and cultural backdrop of her time, a period when the pursuit of knowledge was often seen as contrary to God's will and women were confined to traditional roles. Women who ventured into writing faced intense criticism and social condemnation. In addition to this societal pressure, many women contended with overwhelming workloads and had little time for writing. They also experienced unequal access to education. Some internalized the widespread belief in their intellectual inferiority, perpetuated by nearly all authoritative voices.

Anne Bradstreet was troubled by the prevalent cultural bias against women in her era, which dictated that a woman's place was in the home, catering to her family and husband's needs. Women were often regarded as intellectually inferior and incapable of writing poetry. As a result, when Bradstreet's poems were published, critics accused her of plagiarizing ideas from male writers. Her work faced severe criticism solely because she was a woman and received a different kind of scrutiny than her male peers. The public reaction to Bradstreet's

role as a female writer was similarly harsh. Upon the release of her first publication, "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America," it was necessary to emphasize her virtue as a woman. John Woodbridge, her brother-in-law, wrote on the title page, "By a Gentlewoman in those parts," to reassure the readers that Bradstreet had not neglected her Puritan duties as a wife to write, but had instead found time for her poetry by sacrificing sleep and using her limited leisure time. The anger that Bradstreet feels towards this kind of criticism about her writing is evident in the following lines of her work "The Prologue":

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue

Who says my hand a needle better fits.

A Poet's Pen all scorn I should thus wrong,

For such despite they cast on female wits.

If what I do prove well, it won't advance,

They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance. (25- 30)

Born to a wealthy Puritan family in Northampton, England, Anne Bradstreet was a well-read scholar, particularly influenced by the works of Du Bartas. She married at sixteen, and her family migrated to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. As a mother of eight and the wife and daughter of public officials in New England, Bradstreet wrote poetry alongside her other duties. Her early works reflected the style of Du Bartas, but her later writings evolved into a unique style that focused on her experiences as a mother, her struggles with life's hardships, and her Puritan faith. Raised in cultured circumstances due to her family's status, Bradstreet received a comprehensive education, including history, several languages, and literature. Both her father and husband later served as governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Bradstreet's personal circumstances helped her overcome some of the challenges she faced. Her influential and affluent family supported her writing and proudly circulated her manuscripts. Her brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, took her manuscript collection to London for publication. This private support significantly mitigated the risk of public disapproval. Despite this, her initial publications were not very successful. The first edition of "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America" was poorly received by critics. In this work, as in some of her later ones, she attempted to emulate the style of male authors she admired, which constrained her abilities and suppressed her feelings. However, the publication of her first works gave her the confidence and experience to write more freely. In her later works, she developed her own style, allowing her emotions to be more vividly expressed in her writing.

One of these later works is "In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory", in which Bradstreet proclaims that women are worth something. She praises the Queen as a paragon of female prowess. Chiding her male readers for trivializing women, Bradstreet refers to the Queen's outstanding leadership and historical prominence. This praise for Queen Elizabeth expresses her conviction that women

should not be subordinated to men; certainly, it was less stressful to make this statement in a historic context than it would have been to confidently proclaim the worth of her own work. In a personal caveat underscoring her own dislike of patriarchal arrogance, she points out that women were not always devalued. The use of her emotions in her writings is a technique that changed Anne Bradstreet from a good writer into a great woman writer.

Her success is due to the fact that she expressed the orthodox ideas within her puritan framework and she was not at all rebellious to her societal norms. Not being rebellious, she expressed doubts and subtle feminist statements. The employment of this natural tactic of a writer, writing within the permitted license of a tightly controlled society, helped her to find her own female identity as a poet. The publication of her first volume of poetry seems to have given her confidence and enabled her to express herself more freely. As she began to write of her ambivalence about the religious issues of faith, grace, and salvation, her poetry became more accomplished.

Anne's poetry was mostly based on her life-experience, love for her husband and family. Though she valued knowledge and intellect and was a free thinker and critics find the seeds of feminism in her works, she had an intense devotion to both God and her husband. Her faith and imagination guided her through the most difficult moments and helped her survive the hardships of the colony. Also, 'the viewless wings of poesy' kept her active in moments of loneliness when Simon Bradstreet had been busy doing his official duties. She wrote poems to her own satisfaction intending not to expose her "ill-form'd offspring" to public view. Even when she wrote privately, the readers may come across instances where she compromises her identity accepting male-domination. She sees herself inferior possessing a "feeble brain" and as a sign of willing submission to the Puritan norms, she calls her poems "one unfit for light" in her poem 'The Author to Her Book'. Again, she subscribes to the common saying that woman has a weaker intellect in another poem, 'Prologue':

"And this to mend, alas, no Art is able,
'cause Nature made it so irreparable" (17-18)

and

"Art can do much, but this maxim's most sure:

A weak or wounded brain admits no cure" (23-24)

The speaker in that poem begins with a list of heroic topics that are "too superior things" to her "mean pen". The topics like wars, kings, captains, foundation of commonwealths etc. were usually handled by male-writers at that time. She claims that these are tasks for "Poets" or "Historians" and she does not want to dim their worth through her "obscure lines". Then she compares herself to Du Bartas, a French poet whom she greatly admired. She envies him because the Muses provided him with writing skills so that he "can do what a Bartas will" and she

can only write “according to her skill”. She submits herself to Du Bartas. Here, Anne conspicuously belittles herself and she finds no charm in her writing skill and calls it “foolish, broken, blemished Muse”(16).

This shows the mindset of the women of those days. In their heart of hearts, they had accepted their secondary status in the society. Or at least, Anne admitted it so because she had not been a direct victim of the dictates of the man. Her father provided good education to her which was a sort of Arabian nights to other women. She got support from her husband’s side and her brother-in law was instrumental in bringing her poems to the light. So, at the outset of her poems, Anne seems to be supporting the woman’s humble position in the society. But a second glance at her poems would reveal that she pictures the woman not as a shadow following the man and she raises voice against the unjust tendencies of the Puritan laws.

Much tension between different systems of values was expressed in Bradstreet’s poem, “The Prologue”, reflecting the nature of her Puritanical background. Personally, Bradstreet views herself as an equal to any male writer of the day, but is forced by society to remain submissive and humble. In one instance on the third line, Anne begins, “For my mean pen”, emphasizing that she viewed her ability to write about war and other manly ideas as “lowly or humble”. She was claiming that since she was a woman, she would be unable to write about great events that concern male poets “of wars, of captains, and of kings, of cities founded, commonwealths begun” (1-2)

She refused to pretend to be a man but rather profess herself as an educated woman of the world, not feeling the need to hide her identity. On the fourth line Bradstreet continues, “Nor can I, like that fluent, sweet-tongued Greek who lisped at first, in future times speak plain. By art he gladly found what he did seek;” (19-21), referred to Demosthenes, an ancient Athenian who overcame a speech impediment by practicing with a rock in his mouth. Practice or as stated “art” could not make up for the lack of talent or for the fact that nature had made her a woman. Each critic said that Bradstreet should tend to her knitting and be content doing the typical work of a Puritan woman as stated in lines twenty-five through twenty-six, “I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits”. Many other instances of tension are well noted including the idea that all nine of the Greek Muses were female deities.

In her poem ‘The Author to Her Book’, she writes from a woman’s point of view and she considers her creation as her own child. This feminine tendency makes her feel for the poem and she worries about it. Though she was highly devoted to her family, she seems to be supporting single parentage. She puts forward the ideas of modern western feminism even centuries before when she finds no meaning in the accommodated family life and she seeks solace in separation. She advises her creative work, the child of her imagination:

“If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none;

And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,

Whish caus’d her thus to send thee out of door”. (22-24)

Also, she rages against the “carping tongue” who says “(my) hand a needle better fits”, in her other poem ‘Prologue’. Here she speaks against the then popular tendency for ‘house wifisation’ preached by the Puritan patriarchy. To them, women were not fit to take up the poet’s pen and they had only contempt for “female wits”. After all the trials and tribulations, if she plucks the fruits of success, then they will seek the next best step to pull her down. Anticipating the venomous tactics of the man, she clearly says:

“If what I do prove well, it won’t advance,

They’ll say it’s stol’n, or else it was by chance”. (29-30)

The antique Greeks who had showed a little concern towards the woman were not spared by her contemporary critics. To them, the Greeks are liars and fools.

Then taking a more mature move, she analyses the whole situation. The man claims to be designed to precede the woman and he excels in all fields. It is utter foolishness to wage a war with them. The woman will not get an equal status, however hard she tries. The more she raises voice, the worst will be her condition. So, it is wise to remain silent and be satisfied with whatever ‘His kindness’ provide her. And she wants nothing but “small acknowledgement” from their parts.

Here, the sarcastic tone gives her adequate means to dramatize the whole situation. Her lamb-like demeanour and humble tone are the safest masks that cover the feminist in her properly and at every suitable juncture she reveals her true self and misses no chance to pinpoint the chauvinistic tendencies of the Puritan age to which she belonged.

After reading her poems, one may be prompted to infer that she is a compromising woman. But an analysis of her Puritan background and familial conditions would make the reader think differently. She appears to be supporting the power of men at the beginning of her poems, but later she emerges as a feminist and the readers would find it easy to trace the roots of feminism in Anne Bradstreet. Evidently, she is not an active feminist.

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