

Extracts from *Optimistic Rage. Fix the sexism in literature. A manifesto*

by writers collective Fixdit

translation: Liz Waters

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Because we want rid of it

Try counting. How often are words like ‘oeuvre’, ‘major novel’ or ‘genius’ used to describe female authors? Great authors are always men. It’s a vicious circle: writing by the men at the top sets the norm, and by that measure, women rarely outstrip them. They therefore less often make it into the highest echelons of literature. They win fewer prizes, are less likely to be translated and receive less in subsidy, less prestigious commissions and less media attention.

Virginia Woolf knew how things stood: literature is a reflection of society, so men’s topics are taken more seriously than women’s topics. If as a woman you *do* write a novel of ideas, you’ll be accused of ‘claptrap and *ELLE*-philosophy’. Women should write about what they know. Preferably about themselves, since if their books are in keeping with their identity, they’ll have a better chance of prizes, grants and publicity. Furthermore, women’s work is read with a focus on subject or plot, men’s with more of an eye to form, structure and style. And men are valued more highly a priori, simply for being men.

We should not be surprised that all this has adverse consequences for the careers of women authors. True, they have now made up ground when it comes to presence, popularity and productivity, but as far as recognition is concerned, they still lag behind.

Is this all a big conspiracy? Unfortunately not; that would be easier to solve. These painful inequities are the result of a cultural legacy going back centuries, whose norms have been drawn up by white, heterosexual men, using their own frame of reference, forming a day-to-day social reality with which all of us, men and women, have become wedded to such an extent that we barely see them. It’s a battle with a blind spot. So we ‘keep harping on’ about it. It’s precisely because we want rid of it that we need to bring it up time and again. And we need to begin with ourselves. Each one of us. So I’d say, read more women. Try looking at the world through their eyes. Otherwise you’ll see only half the picture.

Gaea Schoeters

A book for everyone

What do we mean by the term ‘women’s book’? How and when did it creep into our language? And who smuggled it in? I decided to explore Delpher, an extensive digital archive of Dutch newspapers dating back to the seventeenth century.

The earliest occurrence of ‘women’s book’ that I can find is in a 1784 advertisement for *De Almanak van de BROEK en DOEK*, ‘an extremely Galant and Charming WOMEN’S BOOK with lovely Genial pictures’, available for 8 *stuivers* from bookseller Johannes Spriet. Almanacs of this kind were popular until well into the nineteenth century, full of handy advice for clearly defined target groups such as farmers, students and, inevitably, women.

A hundred and fifty years later, in an instalment of a serialization in *De Telegraaf* of *The Fowler* by British author and suffragette Beatrice Harraden, I saw my confusion reflected. Her central character Nora says, ‘Last year a friend of mine wrote a book on the marriage question. It had an immense success; but men, in talking of it, called it a women’s book.’ Nora finds that strange. Why should a bestseller about marriage, a subject in that in those days required both sexes, be called a women’s book?

The impact of the medical bestseller *Het gulden vrouwenboek* (The Golden Women’s Book) by Frau Doktor Anna Fischer-Dückelmann ensures that I come upon the term more frequently from 1902 onwards. But that book is not literary fiction. It concerns ‘what every woman should know about hygiene and medical science’. Women cared for the sick and injured at home, and now they’d be able to refer to this... women’s book.

In 1929 a female critic actually used the term ‘women’s book’ as a literary recommendation. In a review of a Scandinavian novel, historian Annie Romein-Verschoor claimed that the author had written ‘a real women’s book’, comparable to the work of Carry van Bruggen, with ‘the same intelligent articulation of the female subconscious’. She was probably referring to a polemic that had been started by critic Menno ter Braak, who dismissed the great torrent of fiction by women in the early years of the century as ‘ladies’ novels’. According to Ter Braak and his cohort, female authors wrote an inferior type of literature, the ladies’ novel. The term went down in literary history and for years it was adopted by students of Dutch, who were to become our teachers.

‘Ladies’ novel’? ‘Women’s book’? Away with those labels that have been so firmly embedded in our collective subconscious! As a 1900 advertisement for the novel *Nell* by popular writer Helena Mathers puts it: Girl’s book, women’s book, yes, NELL is a book for everyone!

Sanneke van Hassel

Name and go on naming

To explain why women are so underrepresented in the prescribed literary canons and the canons in our heads, both quantitative arguments ('there aren't any') and qualitative arguments ('they're not good enough') are deployed.

People who are not unduly imprisoned in negative prejudice regarding literary work by women usually dismiss the qualitative argument out of hand as soon as they have actually read the work.

The quantitative argument requires more complex clarification. Female writers have been around for a very long time. According to literary critic Harold Bloom, the texts that lie at the root of the Hebrew Bible were written by a woman. The first literary author we know of is Enheduanna, a Sumerian high priestess who lived in the city of Ur, in what is now Iraq, some 4,300 years ago. For five hundred years, she was of huge cultural importance in Mesopotamia. Whenever I mention her, suspicion seems to arise concerning the state of my mental health. Why does this Verbeke woman keep gibbering on about an invented high priestess?

Bizarre, is it not, that the first author known to us is absent from our collective memory, despite the fact that the clay tablets and cylinder seals on which she wrote her fantastic poems were discovered a century ago? Might it have something to do with her sex or her origins?

(...)

I readily acknowledge that I had a great deal of catching up to do myself. After tallying fifteen years' worth of personal reading matter, I determined that male authors were responsible for seventy per cent of the books I had read (with great enthusiasm in many cases, incidentally). It takes a bit of detective work, concentration, willingness and effort to get to know the work of women of the past. You often need to go in search of second-hand copies of their books, because anything not regarded as important enough disappears from the market. When fellow writer Jannah Loontjens suggested making a series of podcasts about great works written by women, I saw it as a chance for us to go on a literary voyage of discovery together.

Annelies Verbeke

What a laugh, man

When I started writing my first stories, I preferred to think with the brain of an obstreperous boy, a bitter adult man, or an elderly chap. As long as the voice was a man's. The testosterone in their view of the world was the salt that flavoured the dish; it made my sentences more serious, more ironic, more literary than when I opted for the perspective of a girl or a woman – even if I made the female character do, think and say exactly the same things.

Years went by before I realized this was because I'd got used to identifying with the male experience of the world when I was reading, that it was the perspective that had become for me the hallmark of high literature.

I wanted to free myself from it, so I started giving women and girls space in my stories. 'A woman walks upright, just like a man,' wrote Anna Maria van Schurman in the seventeenth century. That struck me. The humour of that truth, which extends into all domains. After the publication of my novel *Misschien wel niet* (Or Maybe Not), in which motherhood has a part to play, another author said to me, 'The book would have been more positively received if you'd written it from the point of view of a man; the irony would have come across better.' And I got what he meant. I too laughed more loudly at the floundering and self-pity of young fathers.

Whether you find someone convincing, humorous, coherent or sharp has to do with the image you have of them. And women simply have less sense of humour, just as they can't drive cars, or used to be unable to read a broadsheet newspaper. Turning those big, thin paper pages – impossible for a woman. Haha! Even I laughed. Because those images of women were such clichés! Weren't they? Why was I laughing, actually?

Loontjens, whose eyes are you looking through?

Jannah Loontjens

Shantie writes to Rachida

Dear Rachida,

Books were important to me from an early age. Almelo, where I grew up, seemed like a little planet suspended in the sky just above the rest of the country. Everything important was down there below. But the smaller my world, the more I tended to create another in my head. In literature I could become everything and everyone. Stories were a given, but it never occurred to me to make a contribution to literature myself. Until I met Gharietje Choenni during the Winternachten literary festival in The Hague. Somebody introduced us, and told me she was a writer. To me, that sounded magical.

It was 2011. I was secretly working on my first novel, but I didn't dare call myself a writer. That was for other people.

Then suddenly there was Gharietje Choenni, writer and women's rights activist. She made an impression immediately with her energetic, sparkling personality. The more I found out about her, the better it got. Born in the 1950s in Suriname, her father had named her after Ghargi, a female philosopher in ancient India. She wrote poetry in Hindustani and Dutch. I could hardly believe she was real.

Only after I'd met my role model did I realize that stepping out into the world with work you've created yourself is not just something for 'a different type of people'. No, I could do it myself.

I discovered that hardly anyone in the Netherlands knew the work of Gharietje Choenni, my great inspiration. The same went for the work of Bea Vianen (which is fortunately now getting more attention), even though she was a good deal more famous. What a disappointment. It seemed that the writers who so inspired me didn't win prizes, nor the hearts of a broad readership. Do you recognize this, Rachida? Who were your literary heroes?

Dear Rachida, sometimes I wonder to what extent invisibility makes itself felt in the world of literature. If you hardly ever see yourself in it, will you then unconsciously think of literature as something of which you can never really be part? What does that do to you as a reader, as a writer or potential writer, or indeed as a person in this society? Writers have influence. Those who describe reality, and have a stage from which to do so, contribute to that reality. But what if you never truly believe that your voice is valuable enough to be heard?

Thanks to Fixdit I have above all gained one important insight: you don't need to squeeze yourself into a square mould if you're a triangle. No, there's enough space for all shapes and we can claim that space. And that's exactly what we, as Fixdit, do.

Shantie Singh

Some lines from the FIXDIT Manifesto

We writers are loners; TOGETHER we can bring about change

We're not competitors, we're ALLIES; long live our rustling, flapping, swishing revolution!

Here's to a more diverse palette.

In the battle for polyphony in literature and the literary field, we find our strength and our freedom.

Literature is a haven! May ALL voices (from a wide range of gender, cultural and social backgrounds) be heard loud and clear in literature.

We name the names of women who write and continue to name those names. Canonization is a JOINT EFFORT!

Terms like women's literature, queer literature or migrant literature reveal where the power lies.

Literature has within itself a liberating, indeed subversive force (which we overlook in the neoliberal rat race). Everything, absolutely everything, can and must be questioned. In literature you can be EVERYONE! And by the way, literature is for everyday use. It is breath, necessary for survival.

WARNING: reading too little literature by women can lead to mental poverty, to BLIND SPOTS in daily life, a strangely one-sided view of humanity and a serious lack of knowledge about the world.

Rachida writes to Shantie

Dear Shantie,

Literature is the place where ambiguity can run rampant, where nothing is what it seems, and yet you and I stand out as writers of colour, along with our subject and our characters. That's why your book *De kier* (The Crack), in which you write about domestic violence, could not possibly be about anything other than your own experience as an abused Hindustani woman. That's why one of my male characters in *Vrouwland* (Woman Country) who is rather hostile to women was seen as standing for all Moroccan men, because by definition they are all hostile to women.

Isn't it tragic to have to conclude that in the real world we're seen as a group, as a collective, interchangeable, and that our literature is assumed to reflect that? That our characters are seen as the same as us and suffering the same fate, rather than allowed to be individuals?

If I object when people introduce me as an 'ethnic writer', by telling them that I write in Dutch and am not familiar with 'Ethnic' as a language, I'm told, 'Yes, but you choose that subject yourself, don't you? By writing about immigrants. About migration, about identity.' Believe it or not, after publishing a novel and a short story collection I was asked in all seriousness by a journalist when I was going to write about 'normal' subjects.

But what are 'normal' subjects, and who decides?

Everything is story, all that differs is the perspective. And because we write literature from a different perspective, an error message lights up in the heads of a great many people and they have immense difficulty placing us and our work, because at all costs it has to be located and labelled. You hear them desperately thinking, 'What in god's name is this?'

This, dear people, is literature that for a change doesn't take the self-declared Eurocentric centre of the world as its starting point, the centre where it's mainly white men who decide what real literature is and what subjects and themes literature worthy of the name generates.

Rachida Lamrabet

Read to grow

From literature you learn something about the world and about life. But what world and what life do children explore in the books they're given to read at school? How do we prepare them to look at a diverse world from multiple perspectives? Although almost twenty per cent of Dutch children have at least one parent who does not come from the West, the main character in Dutch-language children's literature and in Dutch schoolbooks is still almost always a white child, usually a boy, from the Low Countries. True, in recently published titles he is quite likely to make friends with a non-white child. But what that child thinks of it all, the young reader never finds out. The intention is good, but the message remains: white is the standard, non-white the exception. Young readers have for decades been asked to identify with those same mainly white, heterosexual, male characters and to 'discover the world' from their point of view. But the 'universal' heroes they get to know are not as universal as we would like to believe. This one-sidedness is a remarkably poor fit with the 'woke' environment of young adults themselves, with #MeToo and the growing desire to understand the other, something that has even been laid down in a new citizenship law. Boys as well as girls, and especially those who are still unsure what they want to be, have a one-sided view of the world thrust upon them in these books. No wonder many start to hate reading, or only after leaving school truly begin to discover what it can mean for them. The reading list for the school leaving certificate is a massive missed opportunity. Why do schoolchildren, including girls, go for a book written by a woman only one time in every four? Not because they appreciate them less. On the contrary, titles by women actually score slightly higher, studies show – as do those by non-Western authors incidentally – and their books are slightly more often read from cover to cover, too. We must broaden children's reading horizon. Don't unthinkingly copy the reading lists. Rebel! Go and talk to your local librarians. Follow writers. And if young people don't do that themselves, then there's a job here for parents. Give children advice, whether they ask for it or not. Buy or borrow inspiring novels and stories by women. Put them on the bedside tables of your sons and your daughters.

Yra van Dijk

The other half of history

How can it be that historical novels with women as the central characters are so few and far between? It seems likely that prejudices get in the way. Firstly, historical novels are a suspect literary genre. Because Hella Haasse wrote historical novels, she has a rather inferior image in the Netherlands as a 'storyteller'; she's not taken entirely seriously. Moreover, books with women in the central role score fewer literary points, studies show. So it's doubly difficult. Who dares take that on?

But isn't it also true that these novels are scarce because many of us are unaware how exciting the history of women is? We have barely any idea. For generations the history of half of humankind was virtually invisible because next to nothing was taught about it. And that often remains the case.

But just try taking one year at random: 1629. In the middle of the Republic of the Netherlands that summer a woman, Aenneken Aeriaensdr van Vijanen, stood aboard a barge as her own ship sailed into the harbour at Alkmaar with a cargo of fourteen thousand 'Flemish bricks'. In The Hague, publisher Machteld Aelbrechtsdr van Leuninghen had pages of writing by Erasmus put through a platen press; she was the official government printer, no less. Barbara Adriaens disguised herself as a soldier and a few years later, in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, under the pseudonym Willem Adriaens, married Hilleetje Jans and paid dearly as a result. In the Netherlands and far beyond, the world has always teemed with wayward women.

All across Europe, monuments are now being erected at universities to make the role of women in history visible. There have been more women authors, painters and scientists than we imagined. Women became merchants, members of guilds, spies or financiers. The women of the past didn't let anyone steal their thunder. They were far more powerful and important than we assumed for a very long time.

So come on then, where are the novels in which women from history come to life?

Fleur Speet

Nailed to the wall of my study

Forgotten, gone, banished. Again and again, we come upon texts that dust off the pedestal on which a sculpture of a female artist, author, scientist, philosopher, doctor or fighter for human rights has unjustly not been installed: ‘the forgotten such and such’, or ‘so and so, who has almost completely disappeared from the collective memory’. A documentary about Leonora Carrington entitled *The Forgotten Surrealist*. Or, in the Literature Museum, ‘the forgotten Henriette van Eyck’. Not: unforgotten, or indispensable. With all those references to being forgotten, any influence they may have had is denied. What doesn’t exist or no longer exists cannot have any effect. Always a brief revival and then again ‘rightly’ (so it would seem) back into the grey fog. The historical lines are not drawn, and then there’s the idea that inevitably arises: what has been forgotten was rightly forgotten, otherwise it would have been remembered. It makes the forgetting of the work and achievements of women almost a passive and unavoidable occurrence. A natural phenomenon. A bit like the tides. Not the consequence of being actively kept out of history, whether consciously or unconsciously. But what is your subject matter, then? Is it not that often hidden reality and experience of women that boils and ferments in and under the traditional story, the fairy tale, horror and gothic? That is central to, or given a place in, oral narrative, verbal heritage? Are those genres and narrative forms not often deployed precisely as a way, an opportunity, to get those very real experiences, the reality and history of women, into the world of stories? The visual language of absurdism, surrealism or melodrama, functioning for once not as divergences from reality but as polished mirrors, as lenses focused on that specific reality with its dynamic of power and powerlessness, dependence and independence, sexuality and violence. Yes, just take the special place of violence, both in the outside world and in the supposedly safe home, that haven for the everyday and the ordinary, where drama so often stirs and shows itself alongside the banal, the almost boring (let’s say, the bloodied teddy bear and the muddy pink dress on the crocheted throw). There is no lack of content, pressing subject matter, richness of idiom or formal innovation in the work of women.

Manon Uphoff

Allies

It makes me think of the South African poet Ronelda Sonnet Kamfer. *My literary heroes don't win any important prizes / I've never been anyone's boss or mistress / [...] my poems are for the women in the kitchen / my poems are for the little brown and black kids / in a class full of white children.* Kamfer reminds us that literature has an inherently liberating, not to say subversive power that is diametrically opposed to the hidebound bourgeois ideology of everyone-for-himself-and-god-for-us-all with which our society is imbued. As writers we must avoid the 'laws' of the market and commerce. We must make ourselves less fragile. I mean that literally. We mustn't be so easily hurt, dismissed, excluded. I succeeded in that only when I noticed I could find literary appreciation and recognition elsewhere, outside the established order. In the people for and about whom I write, for example.

Literature is not a 'high' art; literature is not 'non-essential'. Literature is *asem*, breath, as poet and author Antjie Krog once said: 'To be able to breathe.' Necessary for survival.

Literature conceived in this way implies a different image of humankind from the usual hyper-individualistic one, and it takes radical equality as its starting point.

Collaborating in Fixdit is a breath of fresh air, because we put our alliance above mutual competition. By no longer competing with each other, are we implicitly saying something about literature, too, where myths about winners and losers, good and evil, femininity and masculinity and other artificial contradistinctions are in fact questioned? Stereotypes do not do well in prose and poetry; the writer falls flat.

I'm convinced that these kinds of collaborations and alliances are ultimately more effective in combating inequality than when we each fight our own battles, as we usually do, and that it helps us when, on juries or committees, at schools and universities, in interaction with publishers and in the media, we fight for more equality, diversity, the rediscovery of 'forgotten' authors and poets, and a different way of looking at the writing profession. Because then we're no longer alone. The success of one of us is success for us all.

Christine Otten