

## **What is a 'woman's voice' and why are we so afraid of it?**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to highlight the importance of giving a voice to women both in literature and in today's society. It discusses the themes of oppression and abuse with reference to a novel called *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and touches upon the oppression of victims of sexual assault in the light of the recent #MeToo movement.

It cannot be denied that the representation of women as both characters in and writers of literature has been, for many years, a rather significant issue affected by stereotypes and poor representation. It's not uncommon to read a novel written by a male writer where the main role of a woman falls into one of the two categories: they're a grossly underdeveloped love interest or an overly sexualised version of a female. This leads me to question – why are we so afraid of giving women a voice, not only in literature but also in the real world?

Since the earliest examples of literature, writing has very much been seen as a male craft and female writers have had to build up their reputation as serious writers in a very patriarchal context. Many eighteenth and nineteenth century writers would publish their works under gender neutral names or male pseudonyms to have their works taken seriously or published in the first place. Take the Bronte sisters, for example. Emily Bronte's critically acclaimed *Wuthering Heights* was published under the name Ellis Bell and when it was revealed it was in fact Emily, many refused to believe it.

Sarah M. Pritchard investigated the way the relationship between women and literature has developed over the period of a thousand years and, unsurprisingly, found that domestic work and roles were the 'primary 'acceptable' sphere'<sup>1</sup> about

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<sup>1</sup> S.M. Pritchard, 'Women and Writing: A Thousand Years', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 50.3 (1989), 279-283 (p. 4).

which women were expected to write. While there were writers who refused to conform to these expectations to an extent, such as the Bronte sisters mentioned previously or Jane Austen, they did still write frequently about the domestic sphere as did most women writers. But why?

This is not a question that can be easily answered but it might have a lot to do with the fact that people were and still are resistant to change. Making women believe that they don't deserve a voice, be it in literature or in society, oppresses women into submission. If someone is made to believe that their opinion, their 'voice', does not matter and will not be heard, not many are willing to resist that or believe things should or could be any different. Add to that the way in which women are often depicted by male authors and it creates the perfect platform for women's oppression. In young adult fiction, women and especially young women or teenagers are often written in relation to their male love interests. For example, in the hugely popular *The Twilight Saga* series, the main focus is on female character's obsession with the male lead and his extreme control and emotional abuse is romanticised. As scholars have argued, YA fiction has the 'potential to promote a life-long love of reading'<sup>2</sup> and 'address issues important to students'<sup>3</sup> which makes it imperative that women are written in an inspiring manner.

Today, women have more opportunities in literature and respect from their male counterparts than ever before and some of the most critically acclaimed writers are women, such as Margaret Atwood and JK. Rowling. Yet, we are still dealing with women's oppression when it comes to topics that directly relate to stereotypes. One current topic related to this is sexual assault; here, a woman's voice is very often not acknowledged. Some women write stories that encourage others to directly address the subject, including Laurie Halse Anderson. Although her novel *Speak* was published 17 years ago, it remains relevant as it conveys enabling sexual assault victims, both male and female, to voice their experiences. It portrays the devastating effects of not having a way to voice these experiences through the character of

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<sup>2</sup> J. Bach, L. H. Choate, B. Parker, 'Young Adult Literature and Professional Development', *Theory Into Practice*, 50.3 (2011), 198-205 (p. 198).

<sup>3</sup> Bach, Choate, Parker, 'Young Adult Literature and Professional Development', p. 198.

Melinda who is hiding her experience of sexual assault. Melinda hardly speaks at all throughout the novel, carrying her secret and having it destroy her life until the end where she tells her friend Rachael what happened, realising she isn't on her own. It conveys her emotional state when she is around people and shows that the idealised world of high school is not all that it seems. It also shows how much power can come from giving someone a voice to talk about their experiences - Melinda has another encounter with her attacker but this time refuses to stay silent. By the end of the novel, she has transformed and is stronger than she ever believed she could be.

We need to encourage women to use their powerful voices, be it about sexual assault or inequality or simply their opinion, and show them that they are not on their own. We need to make our society aware that a woman's voice is not something to be afraid of but rather something that needs to be encouraged and heard. Writers like Anderson are doing exactly that by creating opportunities for women of all ages to share their stories. In the past year, the #MeToo movement has become one of the most successful methods of abolishing the stigma around sexual assault and female oppression in show-business. Respected female celebrities such as Meryl Streep, Emma Watson and Alyssa Milano have contributed to this platform for women to use as a way to speak out against their mistreatment and join forces to bring about a positive change. After first launching on Twitter it has grown into a worldwide phenomenon and helped hundreds of thousands of women voice their experiences. Although Twitter is not literature, multiple tweets are often joined together to form a narrative of women's accounts which is shared by others worldwide, creating a shared narrative. The movement further inspired thousands of women to march together and make themselves heard at the #MeToo march in Los Angeles in November 2017. The march involved colourful slogans preaching encouragement, women using megaphones to voice their opinion, and everyone marching with one goal in mind – to fight for their right to have a voice and for that voice to be heard, loud and clear. It was an example of the strength of a woman's voice and demonstrated what can be achieved if women work together for a unified cause.

More than ever, women are encouraged to fulfil their potential and speak their mind. There are also more strong female heroines being written for younger ages that can

inspire girls from an early age and encourage the development of their individual personalities and voices. Some examples include Katniss Everdeen from the hugely popular young adult *Hunger Games* series and Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series. By reading such characters from an early age, girls can grow up to be more confident in themselves and break the 'helpless female' stereotype so often used in literature previously. While there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done in society as a whole, we are moving closer to a world where a woman's voice is equal to a man's.

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