



## This Novel Changes Lives: *The Women's Room*, Consciousness-Raising and the Confessional Mode<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In literary history, the 1970s appears as a decade when discussions of feminist consciousness, women writers and women readers became quite significant especially within the frame of American feminist literary criticism. Concerns such as consciousness-raising and political nature of personal stories were frequently voiced in literary works which were considered powerful tools in generating feminist awareness among women. Accordingly, the 1970s observed the appearance of a great number of literary works which particularly focused on women and encouraged the scrutiny of patriarchal oppression and stereotypically produced passive and inferior images of women. Published in 1977 with a cover announcing that "this book will change lives," Marilyn French's best-seller *The Women's Room* is one of the novels where the personal stories of the protagonist highlight their political nature and depict her consciousness-raising towards a more liberated identity. In this paper, I argue that while generating the novel's one of the main themes, consciousness-raising also functions as a plot device and is presented and reinforced through the use of the confessional mode which, as a subgenre of autobiographical fiction, is particularly used in feminist texts to accentuate the awareness of the sexual politics infused in seemingly mundane and private stories of women.

**Keywords:** Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, feminist fiction, consciousness-raising, confessional mode

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In her 2006 introduction to *The Women's Room*, noting the improvements in women's lives in western countries since the first publication of the novel in 1977, Marilyn French (2007a) expresses that women's situation is still not good, and in some parts it has even worsened (p. vii). Moreover, there is a decline in feminist tools of delivering knowledge such as columns, articles and media broadcasts (French, 2007a, p. ix). She also reproaches the ubiquitous trivialization of women's work in general and expresses that literary arena is a reflection of a world where women's work is undervalued (French, 2007a, p. xiii). For French

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(2007a), such underappreciation is very much related to men who are unwilling to accept the existence of “a different value system;” and she argues that “Men in power do not even hear the radical criticism because they have prelabelled it invalid, soft-headed, or insane” (p. xiv). In this sense, *The Women’s Room*, she says, is a novel that disrupts the conventional idea that “men are central to women’s lives” (French, 2007a, p. xiv). Therefore, the novel assiduously makes women central and relates the unjust acculturation of gender roles in which women are dominated by men. Thus, it breaks “the major taboo in art,” by showing that “the male is not, by nature or desert, superior to the female” (French, 2007a, p. xv). Although this causes her to be criticized as a man-hater, French believes that she is challenging the “core” governed by men, which is, for her, the very work of feminism and is still very much needed as the conventions in political, social and literary field continue to favor men over women. This is the reason, she notes, why *The Women’s Room* can still provide women with refreshing points. With the same aim in the past, the novel was marketed as a life-changing novel. It was published in 1977 with a cover announcing that “this book will change lives” (Wilson, 2001, p. 47) and in 1978, with Fay Weldon’s statement that “the kind of book that changes lives<sup>2</sup>” (Hanne, 1996, p. 37). After all, a change in perspective and consciousness was the purpose of the novel. In her afterword to the novel, Susan Faludi (2007) mentions the influence of the novel on its female readers through an anecdote:

I well recall returning home from college my freshman year to the flushed and fuming presence of my mother, who had just finished *The Women’s Room*. She felt, she said at the time, as if French had taken up residence in our living room and transcribed every detail into a novel. Then she realized that the similarities were no coincidence, because what had happened to the wife across the street and the one next door to her. They had all been had, or let themselves be had, and she was filled with the sort of anger that is peculiarly bracing, the kind of fury that fuels small and big changes. (p. 521)

Aspiring to create such important changes in women’s lives<sup>3</sup>, Marilyn French clearly and persistently showed her feminist concerns in *The Women’s Room*, soon after which she was amongst the most popular women writers in the United States. She promptly became a best-seller author as the novel sold 20 million copies and was translated into 20 languages (Sulzberger & Mitgang, 2009). Susanna Radstone (1989) attributes this popularity to her writing in the context of the 1970s when there was a keen demand for “women’s novels” whose plots pivoted on the changes a female protagonist goes through, which foregrounded the importance of female reading public (p. 1). In this respect, French was quite conscious of her use of literary conventions to actualize her feminist goals which revolved around revealing women’s problems in a patriarchal world.

Referring to the feminist readers in the 1970s, Toril Moi (1988) explains that they needed “the representation of female-role models in literature” as they not only wanted to see their own experiences in literature but also sought to identify with “strong, impressive female characters” (p. 47). Likewise, considering the American feminist literary criticism focusing on “images of women,” Cheri Register (1996) says that since it is traced back to the women’s liberation

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<sup>2</sup> The cover for the 2007 edition includes this sentence, as well.

<sup>3</sup> In an interview by Ayşe Düzkan, Turkish feminist writer Duygu Asena (2001) mentioned that she liked Marilyn French’s style and Düzkan also related that she and her friends became feminists through *The Women’s Room*. Thus, to a certain extent, French was successful in her aim to create feminist consciousness among women and changing their lives.

movement such criticism “values literature that is of some use to the movement” (p. 236). Accordingly, she says, a feminist novel reveals at least one or some of the following items: it should “serve as a forum for women,” “help to achieve cultural androgyny;” “provide role-methods,” “promote sisterhood,” and “augment consciousness-raising” (Register, 1996, p. 236). Remarkably, the 1970s observed the appearance of a great number of literary works which particularly focused on women and encouraged protests against patriarchal oppression and stereotypically produced passive and inferior images of women. That being said, many feminist writers and publishers considered that “literature was a political tool” and “it could be used to raise the consciousness of individual readers, to spread knowledge about feminist philosophies, even to incite social revolution” (Loudermilk, 2005, p. 11). It is thus not surprising to see many examples of women-centered feminist fiction such as Marge Piercy’s *Women on the Edge of Time*, Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Lisa Alther’s *Kinflicks* and Marilyn’s French *The Women’s Room*. Lisa Maria Hogeland (1998) defines such texts as “consciousness-raising novels” in which “the protagonist moves from feeling somehow at odds with others’ expectations of her, into confrontations with others and with institutions, and into a new and newly politicized understanding of herself and her society” (p. 23). These novels represent female characters and their experience of many issues such as sexuality, menstruation, abortion and marriage within the frame of their encounter with women’s liberation movement and their increasing awareness of the political nature such issues. In this respect, confessional mode as a subgenre of autobiographical fiction is particularly used in the context of feminism as it seeks to display “the intersection between autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women’s experience (Felski, 1989, p. 94). Thus, while showcasing the private stories of the protagonists/narrators, the confessional mode address to a broader frame underscoring the problems and situation experienced by many other women and indicates the necessity of the awareness of the sexual politics infused in daily relations. It is, therefore, of particular importance that *The Women’s Room* is written in the confessional mode to depict the consciousness-raising of the narrator protagonist Mira Ward and her experience of many diverse issues such as sexuality, marriage, motherhood and individuality during the 1950s and 1970s in America. Mira enacts many different roles such as a submissive housewife in a suburban neighborhood, a self-sacrificing mother confined in her domestic space and a supporter of women’s liberation. At the end of the novel, she is teaching at a small university in a coastal town and having a solitary life; it is eventually revealed that Mira is also the narrator of the novel, which is yet blurred throughout the course of the novel. Notably, the personal stories of the protagonist highlight their political nature and her selected pieces of life experience are constructed in a way to highlight her consciousness-raising towards a more liberated identity. Within this frame, I argue that while generating the novel’s one of the main themes, consciousness-raising also functions as a plot device and is presented and reinforced through the use of the confessional mode.

In its depiction of the protagonist as a dynamic character, the confessional mode uses of a retrospective first-person narration to indicate its autobiographical nature and to claim that the narrating voice and the protagonist are the same person (Coward, 1996, p. 222; Loudermilk, 2004, p. 39; Radstone, 1989, p. 19). In parallel to this idea, the narrator in *The Woman’s Room* is the protagonist who is retrospectively narrating her own story; nevertheless, it is only at the end of the novel that the narrator and the central protagonist are transparently revealed to be the same person. The novel opens with a narrator who is distanced from the protagonist: “Mira was hiding in the ladies’ room. She called it that, even though someone had scratched out the word ladies’ in the sign on the door, and written women’s underneath. She called it that out of thirty-years of habit, and until she saw the cross-out on the door, had never thought about it” (French, 2007b, p. 1). Rather than a first-person narrator, the text—at this time of the narrative—is

imbued with the omniscience of a third-person narrator who is observing Mira from the outside. As a 38 year-old female student at Harvard, Mira feels depressingly alienated from herself and her environment:

She arrived in the corridor a little late. No one was left in the hallway, lingering, loitering outside the classroom doors. The blank eyes, the empty faces, the young bodies that ten minutes earlier had paced its length, were gone. It was these that, passing her without seeing her without looking at her, had driven her into hiding. For they had made her feel invisible. And when all you have is a visible surface, invisibility is death. Some deaths take forever, she found herself repeating as she walked into the classroom. (French, 2007b, pp. 3-4)

It is after these lines that the narrator starts using “I” and decreases her distance from Mira. Directly addressing to the reader, she reveals her stance towards Mira as follows:

Perhaps you find Mira a little ridiculous. I do myself. But I also have some sympathy for her, more than you, probably. You think she was vain and shallow. I suppose those are words could have been applied to her, but they are not the first one that spring to my mind. I think she was ridiculous for hiding in the toilet, but I like her better for that than for the meanness of her mouth, which she herself perceived, and tried to cover with lipstick. Her meanness was of the tut-tut variety; she slammed genteel doors in her head, closing out charity. But I also feel a little sorry for her, at least I did then. Not anymore. (p. 4)

The narrator’s sympathy towards Mira becomes noticeable as she expresses that she no longer feels pity for her. Remarkably, even at this early stage, we are repeatedly made aware of the present tense of the narrating voice and of the fact that this narrator was also familiar with Mira in the past, which recapitulates her claim that Mira has changed. Furthermore, she immediately shifts the focus to herself saying that she sees no difference between herself and Mira: “There’s Mira with all her closed doors, and here’s me with all my open ones, and we’re both miserable” (p. 4). Soon after this passage, she says that she now often walks on the beach and thinks about Mira and the other women she met at Harvard in 1968, again positioning herself in the past with these characters. Acknowledging her acquaintance with Mira, she contrasts herself to Mira who, she said, lived in a fairy-tale and “had no notion of reality” (p. 4); while describing Mira as insecure and inexperienced, she situates herself as more mature and self-confident and thus a bit superior to Mira. From these opening pages onwards, the focalization shifts between the first-person narrator and Mira; yet she does not reveal her identity and speaks as if she is one of the women who once knew Mira. Within these initial pages, the narrator shows that when she remembers Mira, her “belly twists with a little contempt” (French, 2007b, p.4); nevertheless, she confesses that she is very much like herself and other women she knows and asks the reader whether she finds her familiar, too. She claims that: “You know her: she’s that blonded made-up matron, a little tipsy with her second manhattan, playing bridge at the country club” (p. 8). Although, at this moment, she still refers to herself as a distinct person distanced from Mira, the narrator familiarizes herself, other female characters and the reader with Mira and indicates that they all have similar problems and experiences. Thus, claiming a figurative bonding with the fictive and real world, the narrator argues that “we observed and believed what people said about us” (p. 9). Frequent uses of “us” and “we” are noted from then on and the narrator hints that she is a person whom Mira knew both in the suburbs and at Harvard:

I hear Martha's<sup>4</sup> voice often as I walk along the beach. And others' too – Lily, Val, Kyla<sup>5</sup>. I sometimes think I've swallowed every woman I knew. My head is full of voices. They blend with the wind and the sea as I walk the beach, as if they were disembodied forces of nature, a tornado whirling around me. I feel as if I were a medium and a whole host of departed spirits has descended on me clamoring to be let out. (French, 2007b, p. 9)

Seeing herself as a “medium” between the past and the present, she decides to “write it all down” (p. 9). Yet she still conceals herself saying that she is not a writer but a teacher of grammar and composition. What she will do is to “put down bits and pieces, fragments of time, fragments of lives” (p. 9). Being even more specific, she says she will write about Mira to answer “How did she manage to get herself, at the age of thirty-eight, to hide in that toilet?” (p. 10). Consequently, the narrator begins to present fragments of the lives of Mira and other women she has known, and thus introduces her confessional narrative as a way out to the voices in her mind.

As the novel presents Mira's increasing awareness of gender roles and oppressive mechanisms of patriarchy, the narrator's resemblance to the protagonist discloses itself and the distance between the two decreases. Yet it is only at the end of the novel that they are revealed to be the same person:

She [Mira] finished her dissertation, and when it was accepted, took her divorce money and went to Europe and travelled around alone for eight months, breathing it in, sucking it up. Then she came back and tried to get a job, but the market had dried up and nobody wanted to hire a woman over forty even if she had a Harvard degree, and so she ended up at this little community college near the coast of Maine, and she walks the beach every day, and drinks brandy every night, and wonders if she's going mad. (pp. 514-515)

It is uncovered that it is Mira herself who has narrated the selected fragments of her life aiming to illustrate the changes she has experienced. Joannou (2000) describes Mira's being both a narrator commenting on events and a character in these events as a “double function” which enables Mira to “meditate on suburban life, motherhood, loneliness, men, the situation of women in the university, and the situation of women in general” (p. 119). As a matter of fact, the novel goes through the shifting commentaries on Mira the protagonist who is going through a process of consciousness-raising and the narrator Mira who has already experienced consciousness-raising and her retrospection over that life. The text thus accentuates the process of an ordinary woman gaining feminist awareness and makes this change visible through juxtaposing two different perspectives—first-person and third-person—on the same self. In that frame, secretively self-referential comments of the third-person narration provide a deeper understanding and a more promising outcome of the protagonist's experience of feminism.

Remarkably, throughout the narrative, the omniscient third-person narrator includes her commentary on women's experience which is made through focalizing on Mira as she used to be, on herself as she now is, and on the reader whom she sees as a possible candidate for a

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<sup>4</sup> Mira's friend from the suburbs

<sup>5</sup> Mira knew Lily from the suburbs, and she met Val and Kayla at the university.

similar transformation. In this respect, while Mira the protagonist becomes the embodiment of women's private problems that are normally concealed and treated as non-existent, Mira the narrator gives explanatory notes related to the political implications of these problems. Various groups of women Mira meets in different phases of her life hence illustrate the certain fragments of her process of consciousness-raising, through which the vitality of a feminist awareness is further foregrounded. Highlighting the significance of knowledge in women's confessional writings, Joannou (2000) enunciates that:

The teleology of the confessional narrative is politically inspired and is analogous to the structure and organisation of the consciousness group. A woman writer, like a woman participating in a consciousness-raising group, selects from the possible events in her life those which appear to illustrate her philosophy and to make her into the woman whom she now is. (p. 107)

Accordingly, while writing her life, Mira selects passages from her childhood, school years, dates, a near-rape experience, marriage, motherhood, interactions with other suburban housewives, divorce, going back to university, and meeting a group of women with feminist awareness. In the opening pages of the novel, Mira is back at the university as a divorced woman and a mother to two children. The narrator first reflects Mira's thinking that "the ladies' room for which she had to climb three flights of old stairways] was in an inconvenient location" and was added later to the building (French, 2007b, p. 3). She was actually told that the school was originally designed for men and there were even places where women were not allowed to go. Mira at that time only wondered why this was the case, she did not think on it any further. That is why the narrator, who is now a more aware woman, feels pity for her; she indirectly reports Mira's crushed acceptance with the question "[w]omen were so unimportant anyway, why would anyone bother to keep them out?" (p. 3). Apart from the ladies' room's inconvenient location, Mira has experienced many instances where women are deprived of the privileges of men. For example, when she was younger, after going to a party with her male friends whom she regarded as close friends, Mira's understanding of friendship with males completely changed since barely escaped being raped. She was disappointed to see that men felt free to abuse and rape her because she was a single woman who went to a party and got drunk; she was traumatized to observe:

That a woman was not marked as the property of some male made her a bitch in heat to be attacked by any male, or even by all of them at once. That a woman could not go out in public and enjoy herself dancing without worrying what every male in the place was thinking or even worse, what they might do, seemed to her an injustice so extreme that she could not swallow it. (p. 36)

She recognized that although history books wrote that women's suffrage had given them equality, she was not free because she "was constitutionally unfree" (36). Since being single makes her vulnerable sexual abuse, Mira later chooses to marry Norm only because she feels she has no other option. Mira thinks that "it was less a new beginning" "than a continuation" because "[a]lthough the external events of her life changed, the internal ones remained much the same" (p. 38). The narrative thus shows that in real life marriage is only a legalization of the already existing patriarchal oppression. Moreover, while Mira is trapped in domestic chores, Norm's life continues as usual and he improves his career. Mira chooses to be a clerk-typist since her husband does not want her to take a job in the city. Her bus journeys to and from work are long, and she starts preparing the dinner as soon as she comes home. She wants to do some

reading but cannot because of the noise of the TV Norm watches. Although she is inclined to blame for not finding time to study, Mira expresses that “she was so tired after eight hours in an office, two on buses, preparing dinner, washing dishes—a job Norm simply refused” (French, 2007b, p. 40). Eventually, she becomes a housewife and mother to two children and dismisses her desire to pursue an academic career. Evolving into a suburban housewife, Mira calls life in the suburbs a “lazy” one in which nothing interesting happens (p. 77). Through the structure of relations in suburbia, the texts draws attention to the fact that these women do not question their submissive status; problematically, the longer they keep silent, the more oppressed they become:

The unspoken, unthought-about conditions that made it oppressive had long since been accepted by all of them: that they had not chosen but had been automatically slotted into their lives, and that they were never free to move (the children were much more effective as clogs than confinement on a prison farm would be). Having accepted the shit and string beans, they were content. (pp. 77-78)

Even Mira, who later experiences consciousness-raising that moves her to carry on with her own aspirations, at that time of her life, does not struggle against her husband's discouragements and ignores his absence from home thinking it is work-related; she starts to focus on her individual life only after her husband asks for a divorce, and only after recovering from her first reactions which were drinking heavily and attempting suicide. Later, when talking about her suburban life, Mira notes many other women whose lives are continually oppressed by their husbands.

Strikingly, while the narrator can directly voice the problem, the women Mira knows at that phase of her life cannot do this. Unlike these silenced characters, the narrator bluntly argues that men always win mainly because women are economically dependent on men and education, professional life, marriage, laws, and all economic and political institutions collaborate in the creation of a privileged male culture. Distancing herself from Mira and other characters who are yet unaware of the political nature of their mundane problems, the narrator repeatedly lays bare these relations through which women internalize their underprivileged status. It is worth mentioning that referring to the emphasis on women's economic, public and private oppression in consciousness-raising and confessional writing, Waugh (2006) highlights that “[c]onfession was part of an attempt to forge, for the very first time, the political solidarity of a woman-centered culture organized to subvert the patriarchal structures (political and economic) of the liberal state” (p. 200). Likewise, through the confessional mode, *The Women's Room* shows how Mira gradually acknowledges the political nature of her oppression, which endows her with a subversive quality. Here it is relevant to refer to the publisher's blurb advertisement of the novel in the 1970s:

[*The Women's Room*] is the hauntingly powerful story of Mira Ward - the wife of the Fifties who becomes a woman of the Seventies. From the shallow excitements of suburban cocktail parties and casual affairs, through the varied nightmares of rape, madness and loneliness to the dawning awareness of the exhilaration of liberation, the experience of Mira and her friends crystallise those of a generation of modern women. (as cited in Radstone, 2007, p. 103)

Mira thus becomes the representative of a woman gaining feminist awareness through which she escapes oppressive relationships. In this frame, her subsequent decision to go back to

college is the initial step towards a new womanhood since then onwards she decidedly reconsiders her life and concentrates on what she expects from future. Undoubtedly, one important strength she gains is the ability to voice her problems, which is foregrounded through her interactions with the women she meets at the university. Like the women in the suburban neighborhood, these women have problems in their relationships, as well and some of them such as Kyla and Clarissa who have husbands and Val who has a child have traditional female roles in terms of house-keeping and child-care. Iso, who is in a lesbian relationship with Ava, sarcastically comments that: “I hate discussions of feminism that end up with who does the dishes” and Mira accepts that in end “there are always the damned dishes” (French, 2007b, p. 62). In spite of the ever-present dishes even in lesbian relationships, oppression is more powerful in heterosexual relationships; Val, the feminist activist of the novel, is verbally abused by her boyfriend, Kyla complains that her husband still expects her to do all the work though she has some important exams, Iso was raped by her former fiancé, Clarissa was beaten and raped by her husband and Mira’s new boyfriend wants her to leave her career to bear children for her. Nevertheless, they have long discussion sessions where their self-revelations are always elaborated on by each other’s comments, which ably provides them with a context to question their contemporary situation with a critical perspective and discover ways to cope up with their problems. This is why the narrative shifts between two different female subcultures—those Mira knows from the suburbs and those she meets at the university; women in the first group see their problems on the personal level while those in the second group see the problems of women as a political issue and look for ways to end this oppression. The latter group have long discussions about how women situate themselves in relationships and how they become such submissive partners. For instance, evoking the 1970s’ feminist critiques on women’s altruism and self-sacrifice in relationships, Val sees that heterosexual relationships are based on the selflessness of women mainly because women perform what is regarded as their natural job; giving priority to domestic duties they ignore their individual aspirations. Therefore, Val thinks, women are “brainwashed into selflessness” (French, 2007b, p. 61). The group finally agrees that both sexes should perform selflessness, suggesting that “everyone should act in both roles” (p. 62). They also accept that it is only a “rhetorical solution” since in real life it would not work. Actually, all these women even those with a feminist consciousness are disappointed in their relations with men. The narrator points out that the initial crucial step in ending women’s oppression is to start to question male authority, which Mira’s later female friends frequently practice.

Val’s role is particularly important for the consciousness-raising of the novel; while Mira and other women claim that they are “disgustingly apolitical” (p. 442), Val insists that they are in fact political: “you’re political. You aren’t very active, I confess. But one reason you’re not more active is that the political concerns around here [Harvard] are too mild, too detached from your own radicalism to interest you” (p. 442). Despite other women’s reactions to her argument, Val claims that they are all political since they are threatening the male culture and its institutions: “We’re all rebels against the pompous, self-aggrandizing, hollow white male world and its delusions of legitimacy; we all sympathize with illegitimates of every sort because we all feel illegitimate ourselves; we’re all antiwar, anti-establishment, anticapitalism . . . .” (p. 443). Mainly because they question man’s authority, they disrupt men’s “superiority,” “potency” and accordingly “legitimacy” (French, 2007b, p. 444). “Subversion is telling the truth,” says Val, to reassure these women whose very personal stories disturb the conventional, traditional, idealized and accepted representations of normative relationships and denounces them as domineering and oppressive. Accordingly, at the end of the novel, rejecting her boyfriend’s proposal and rejecting the idea of bearing his children, Mira lives alone at a small town where she teaches. She accepts that she is beyond the norm because she defies “the laws passed by the oppressor to keep the oppressed in line” (p. 216). Therefore, her gaining a political

understanding of her personal experiences, which brings with itself the capability to voice and exert this recently endowed vision— is at the heart of the novel's purposeful feminist stance.

Thus far seen, interrogating one's sexed identity is the initial step towards making political sense of one's problems. Important to note is that as the protagonist relates her increasing awareness of gender roles, her experience of sexuality alters, as well. Joannou (200), Wilson (2001) and Coward (1996) particularly remark upon the connection between women's confessional writing and developing an understanding of sexual matters. As Coward (1996) highlights, such texts aim to find answers to the question of "what is female sexual pleasure?" (p. 225), which is constantly underlined in *The Women's Room*. At the beginning of the novel, Mira distracts her gaze from a drawing of female genitalia beneath which "Cunt is Beautiful" has been scratched (French, 2007b, p. 2); she is timid and a stranger to her body. Wondering whether or not the picture is female genitalia or not, the narrator reveals that "[s]he wasn't sure because she had never seen her own, that being part of the anatomy that did not present itself directly to the vision" (p. 2). Furthermore, her early masochistic masturbatory fantasies, which are directed through various cultural channels such as literature, films and psychology, and her early sexual encounters, make Mira resent sex; besides, reading some books on psychology, she learns that "her form of orgasm was immature and showed that she had not yet moved into the 'genital' stage of development" (p. 24). Accordingly, to be a mature woman who "relates to males," Mira tried to be as passive as possible "when they [her dates] slid their arms around her, or tried to grab her body" (p. 24). Yet she felt nothing but "invaded, violated" and, not being able to tolerate the physical contact, eventually stops dating. In this respect, Mira suppresses her sexual desires because she associates sex with men with passivity and masturbation with abnormality. Later, during her date with Lanny, Mira enjoys kissing him and wants to have sex with him: "She wanted him: her body wanted this, and her mind wanted the experience" (p. 26). This time, however, she is impeded by remembering her mother's remarks about sex and how it leads to pregnancy which in return brings a chain of events of marriage, poverty, resentment, a baby and a life like hers:

She saw her choice clearly as being between sex and independence, and she was paralysed by that. Since she always risked pregnancy, which meant dependence, a sexual woman lived with Damocles' sword always over her head. Sex meant surrender to the male. If Mira wanted the independent life, she would have to give up being sexual. This situation was a terrible incarnation of her masochistic fantasies. Women were indeed victims by nature. (p. 29)

Thus, she resists sex and gains the reputation of a "castrater," and is called "domineering," and a "snob." Later, in her marriage to Norm, Mira feels the delight of being able to "kiss and hold without fear" (p. 40). Yet this relationship soon proves for Mira that female orgasm is ignored and not taken serious and after a while she decides that she is frigid. Their sex life deteriorates further when they have children and she feels that the sex with him was always unsatisfying and her attempts to talk to him about sex are blocked by Norm, who reduces her to an object without libido. She feels that he thought it was proper for her not to enjoy sex. It is only later in her relationship with Ben that Mira—now divorced and independent- enjoys the pleasure of sex. Reaching sexual satisfaction with Ben, Mira is able to see that she is not frigid; the problem is not hers but her ex-husband's insensitive and self-centred sexual activities. Through this relationship, Mira feels that she is discovering "a new dimension" (French, 2007b, p. 342). Through the four pages in which their love-making is narrated, Mira actually confesses how she felt in her earlier sexual life: debased, humiliated, submissive and ignored, whereas she now

feels like “a goddess” (p. 345). Significantly, her negative experiences of sexuality and her lack of feminist knowledge are correlated; younger Mira without an awareness of this dimension of sexual politics and the later, narrating, Mira who has experienced political and sexual awakening are juxtaposed to underline her consciousness-raising.

All things considered, it can be suggested that consciousness-raising not only functions as a narrative tool but also constitutes general frame and the aim of the novel. The confessional form with a realistic language and plausible events are thus useful ways for the writer to demonstrate the changes the protagonist experiences throughout the novel. Although the novel was criticized for its realistic mode and anti-male stance, it was also welcomed by critics such as Hogeland (1994), Wilson (2001) and Joannou (2000), who praised French for being able to convey a feminist consciousness to the reader. Defending the novel’s use of realism and its criticism of men, Hogeland (1994), for instance, argued that for non-feminist reviewers, “feminist realist fiction can be credible only insofar as it critiques women and not men—only insofar as it upholds a prefeminist understanding of women’s oppression as personal and not political or participates in antifeminist victim blaming” (pp. 289-290). Obviating the men’s possible roles in women’s problems, such a stance puts the responsibility solely on women; as pertinently expressed by Hogeland (1994): “These reviews thus work to contain feminism’s critique of the political relations between men and women by delegitimizing any negative depiction of men” (p. 290). In this respect, the novel aspires to reflect that some men are really that bad, and they cause women serious problems, hence negative descriptions of men are explicitly inserted into the narrative to call for the urgency of the alteration of such negative attitudes towards women. Accordingly, representation of Mira as a dynamic character transforming herself out of her repressively underprivileged status invites the reader to have a women-centered perspective and experience a similar feminist consciousness-raising. Although it was later dismissed as “a political and literary misconception,” Maria Lauret (1994) draws attention to the importance of *The Women’s Room*’s addressing to the reader saying that “[b]ecause it made many of the ideas of American Second Wave feminism accessible in popular form to a wide audience of uninitiated readers, *The Women’s Room* ... was and still remains one of the founding texts of the modern Women’s Movement” (p. 48).

Correspondingly, *The Women’s Room* evokes a figurative room of consciousness-raising where women can encounter powerful women characters who interrogate the patriarchal system, actualize their independency and can learn from each other. Furthermore, through a confessional mode and manipulation of narrative voices, the novel seeks to highlight the context of women’s oppression by juxtaposing private experience with larger political implications through a character who, in her interaction with women from and in different backgrounds, experiences consciousness-raising that unravels the sources of her subordination. Referring to the general structure of women’s confessional writing, Radstone (1989) discusses that although the female protagonist achieves a “heroine-like status,” “her loneliness and unhappiness rarely decrease” (p. 99). Although it is not known whether she is still unhappy or not, Mira is alone at the end of novel and not very content with her present situation mainly because she, after finishing her dissertation, travelling alone around Europe for several months and not being able to find a job since she is now over forty, has had to move to small town. Detaching herself from her former self, she knows that she is not conventional which, nonetheless, she sees as empowering in relation to subversion of patriarchy. Therefore, she decides to write her own experience and turns this solitary existence into a consciousness-raising tool for other women. As Wilson (2001) also argues, the novel’s contribution to feminist criticism is attributed to “its redemption of the mainstream as arena of struggle” (p. 69). Thus, as French (2007a) claimed in her introduction to the 2006 edition of the novel, *The Women’s Room* can still incite subversive

reconsiderations of women's situation in an increasingly changing world which is liable to conventionalize experience and representation.

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