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Beyond Expectation: Problematizing the Performance of Femininity in “Backfisch” Literature

Review of Julie Pfeiffer’s *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* by Shamiga (Shamy) Arumuhathas

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In Julie Pfeiffer’s *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021), she draws on the attention of a specific set of readers, namely children’s fiction literary scholars, educationalists, and feminists, to critically deconstruct *Backfischliterature* to explore the unexamined intersections of girlhood and gendered performance. Prior to delving into the importance of girlhood and reimagining adolescence as a transformative site, Pfeiffer provides a coherent historical contextualization of *Backfischliterature* by delineating the literary subgenre and its traditional conventions and establishes the young female protagonist as “Backfisch.” Derived from Latin and Germanic sociocultural meanings, *Backfisch* refers to a fish that is too small to be sold at market but too big to be suitable as bait. The Backfisch analogy is later employed to describe the budding girl in mid-19th-century German and American books. Prominent examples of Backfischliterature include Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Emmy von Rhoden’s *Taming a Tomboy*, and Elizabeth Prentiss’s *The Flower of the Family*. In essence, *Backfischliterature* is centered on the female adolescent who is no longer considered a child nor recognized as a mature or eligible candidate for marriage. Although the genre is premised on exploring the awkward phases of adolescence, specifically the uncertainty surrounding adulthood and the (traumatic) departure from childhood, Pfeiffer asserts that Backfisch novels defy negative stereotypical and derogatory framing of the “half-grown girl.” For Pfeiffer, the subgenre situates adolescence in a liminal space that has transformative potential for the heroine’s self-development, which is conveyed through a stable identity that is facilitated either by mothering, mentoring, the salvation of Christian faith, or education along with domestic training.

Through the extensive use of cross-referencing sources which Pfeiffer skillfully achieves by employing *Backfischliterature* as primary texts, which she later uses secondary sources to corroborate, she demonstrates evidential reasoning and compelling arguments. Expertly, Pfeiffer integrates illustrations of the ideal and romanticized versions of the Backfisch, allowing the reader to gain a visual representation of the heroine within her natural environment. Despite childhood theorists such as G. Stanley Hall claiming that *Backfischliterature* fundamentally portrays the erotic objectification of the adolescent girl (Hall, 1904), Pfeiffer subverts such demoralizing theoretical underpinnings by arguing that Backfisch novels celebrate personal transformation that is embedded in innocence while addressing the disorderliness that comes from simply being an adolescent inhabiting a heteronormative patriarchal society. Additionally, contemporary adolescent novels can be reinterpreted as modern *Backfischliterature* due to the underlying theme of departure from the familiar, or the home, which inevitably triggers an onset of suffering and personal growth that ultimately creates a resilient heroine. While discussing the importance of girlhood and the appeal to raise girls in supportive communities allowing them to be vulnerable, Pfeiffer does not shy from addressing the condescending patriarchal undertones that cause young heroines to come of age while navigating a labyrinth of restrictive socially constructed ideals and norms. The journey to womanhood and maturity is induced by physical and emotional conditions for the young heroine, but it is also prompted by the societal expectation of becoming useful and servile to their potential male counterparts such as

husbands. Despite providing an alternative perspective on the in-between space of girlhood and womanhood as transcendent and emancipatory through self-discovery, Pfeiffer interrogates how such dynamic change is largely attributed to gendered expectations and their detrimental implications.

In addition to identifying the tensions and paradoxes within *Backfischliterature*, Pfeiffer provides a sequential sociohistorical overview in the introduction and Chapter 1, “Defining the Backfisch.” In the subsequent chapters, Pfeiffer uses a layered approach to delve into the content that is thematically organized to provide segmented analysis. In Chapter 2, “The Romance of Othermothering,” she discusses the intergenerational relationships that are nurtured between female adolescents and other women who are not necessarily related through maternal relations. Pfeiffer emphasizes that othermothering is a phenomenon in which one relies on a community of females upon leaving home to gain emotional and intellectual comfort. Othermothering encourages adolescents to detach themselves from trajectories connected to sexual desirability by finding pleasure through friendships and bonds with other women; these bonds are essential for young females because they inculcate in them how to be independent when they are expected to be dependent when they wed. Chapter 3, “Converting Girls into Women,” suggests that the act of working is the catalyst that transforms female children into women through domestication (such as running a household) and the personal work of developing a social status and place within the greater society. The transition from girlhood to womanhood is an organic process; however, it is complicated and facilitated through domestic labour and the (metaphorical and social) labour of becoming a woman. Though self-formation requires physical and psychological labour, in Chapter 4, “The Backfisch and Fantasies of Growth,” Pfeiffer makes a compelling argument that self-development is also symbolically linked to the construction of a national identity, or nation building. Chapter 5, “The Homesick Heroine,” unpacks how transformation can be incited through the angst and nostalgia of departing from home, motivating the heroine to return home, not as a child, but as a woman. In the final chapter, “Loving Girls, Loving Growth,” Pfeiffer illuminates a new critical assumption—that the *Backfischliterature* is a messy site entangled with self-discovery, mentorship, and the production of women for a male-dominated society; however, reaching womanhood is not necessarily the epitome or ideal attainment. Rather, the act of continuing the cycle and becoming a mentor for another muddled Backfisch is the real self-satisfying reward.

Performing femininity

The transition between girlhood and womanhood is a natural process, yet the in-between space that is adolescence can be reconceptualized as a limbo where the female protagonist can become seemingly lost in herself in her quest to return home. Thus, mentoring is needed. It is through the intervention of other mothers that young girls can be transformed into women. The act of becoming a woman not only takes place at metaphysical, psychological, and emotional levels, but it must be made visible for other members of the society to observe. In other words, it must be performed. The developmental arc that is a literary convention within *Backfischliterature* also alludes to the evolution of a girl, which involves the emergence and rebirth into a woman that unconsciously and/or consciously transpires. The conversion into a woman demands a deliberate performance of socially constructed notions and characteristics of what is entailed in being a woman in mid-19th-century society. It also represents the commodification of girls. Using a Marxist-feminist theoretical discourse, one understands there is an underlying predetermined assumption that, to be recognized as a woman, a girl will perform the duties of a woman (Driscoll, 2002). Phenotypical transformation is not enough. Performing femininity is a necessary part of the transformation, which often unfolds by executing domestic labour and displaying appropriate feminine etiquette in social settings. The act of performing femininity indicates not only the successful transformation into womanhood but readiness for matrimony and being productive for the family unit and the larger society. Evidently, the performance of femininity also infers the death of childhood and a retreat from the messy adolescent phase.

The nexus of feminine adolescence, capitalism, and Marxist theory affords critical reflection of how performing gendered labour materializes both visibly and invisibly. According to Pfeiffer, domestic labour is invisible work, whereas visible work is contingent on the female performing her feminine traits. Pfeiffer elaborates that

learning to maintain a household and family is one aspect of learning to perform femininity. It shares with gender acquisition a moral imperative—domestic labour is one thing good women do well—but includes visible and concrete definitions of success.... Somehow girls must learn to perform the invisible labour necessary for “virtuous” womanhood. (p. 114)

Through a Marxist-feminist reading, the performance of womanhood is associated with the ideas of consumption and commodification, where a woman is manufactured and expected to portray feminine mannerisms in order to be purchased as a potential bride (Driscoll, 2002). Girls, as daughters, then as adolescents, and later as women, are considered as a material exchange within the marriage structure, and their gender performance is a compulsory requirement to add surplus value to their self within the heteropatriarchal economy. Thus, the natural progression from girlhood to womanhood is embedded in learning to perform femininity, consequently resulting in objectification and oppression.

Othermothering: Epistemological approaches to early childhood education

Aside from being perceived as a maternal network or community of caregivers who provide unwavering support and advice to troubled young female heroines, othermothering can be reimagined as an epistemological approach to early childhood and youth education. As a pedagogical praxis, othermothering can be deduced as a site where narrative knowledge construction transpires. A constructivist epistemological conceptual framework posits that knowledge is coconstructed by intersubjective and interpersonal experience, which is also informed and validated by a community (Edwards, 2005), resulting in a sociocultural practice of learning and development that is fundamentally relevant to early childhood education. Evidently, othermothering not only serves as a safe learning space where emotional support is provided to contribute to the heroine’s well-being and successful transformation, but it also functions as a female-centric knowledge system that exists in a male-dominated society.

The Backfisch novel’s construct of othermothering displays an epistemological semantic shift through which literature has the potential to subvert the male gaze and refocus on collective knowledge development, which is thereby nurtured through emotional intimacy and self-worth. Such attributes are salient in supporting the transformation of the Backfisch into a resilient woman whose value is determined, not by her physical maturation, but rather by her self-esteem, which stems from interdependency and peer interactions facilitated by women. Epistemologically, the role of *Backfischliterature* is to create a community of learners and teachers to produce assemblages of shared knowledge systems that specifically cater to female adolescents during the formative years. As a pedagogical tool, othermothering challenges essentialist and traditional ideologies of education while working as a model of empowerment for young females. Early exposure to othermothering narratives that consist of new perspectives, discourses, and interpretations reveals characteristics of cognitive-constructivist understandings (Edward, 2005) that ultimately reveal how young females construct their learning. For female adolescents, knowledge acquisition is not only limited to religious teaching and discipline but can also be achieved through peer-supporting learning environments, which othermothering offers. Thus storytelling narrated by elder othermothers has the capacity to teach children about the world and themselves, inciting identity construction as they undergo transformation.

Transforming in a liminal space

Early childhood education theorists and scholars assert that the natural or abrupt transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood requires one to navigate through liminal spaces (March & White, 2015; Skott-Myhre, 2015). The liminal spaces often hold ambiguities, awkwardness, identity crisis, and exploration. For Pfeiffer, adolescence, or the Backfisch stage, is a liminal space in which the female heroine is “quasi-mature: erotically attractive but not yet marriageable” (p. 61). Although the liminal space is a place where children are able to articulate complex identities for themselves, it is also a space where the individual becomes more self-aware of the person they seek to be portrayed as in society. Similarly, the Backfisch protagonists undergo a liminal space

that allows for rebirth as a woman—and in these novels, the girl may choose the shape she will take. These novels frame her choices as moral ones, with high stakes, but also show her own agency as key in the process of becoming a woman. (p. 62)

To initiate one to occupy a liminal space requires forcible removal or departure from the childhood home which the young heroine reluctantly leaves behind to become a sensible and domesticated lady. Rather than employing a deficit-oriented lens, such as perceiving the Backfisch as a “baffling problem,” some scholars view the transitional liminal space as an opportunity for the heroine to demonstrate agency and identity. By reframing adolescents as transformative individuals within society, one is able to move beyond the ideology that teenagers are passive and problematic. Understanding the implications of early childhood and youth as a liminal space is salient because it allows practitioners to become cognizant of the psychological shifts in adolescents that urge for self-transformation. Although societal expectations usher the Backfisch to transition and pass through the liminal space quickly to expedite the courting and marriage process, an alternative feminist standpoint suggests that the Backfisch can choose to change on her own terms rather than for those compelling her to do so. Although the liminal space can be an intimidating experience for the Backfisch to navigate, the adolescent phase is a collaborative experience because it is supported and curated by relationships that are centered on mentorship.

Thinking beyond *Backfischliterature*

In *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence*, Pfeiffer articulates sound and insightful arguments about Backfisch novels and their relevance to early childhood and youth. Pfeiffer clearly and logically uses interdisciplinary perspectives to offer a deeper understanding of female adolescents’ transition from girlhood to womanhood. Although Pfeiffer conveys the contemporary relevance of *Backfischliterature* to today’s adolescents, it is important to understand that not all teenagers experience a linear transition like the traditional Backfisch because adolescence is complex and multifaceted. Although Pfeiffer’s sociocultural and historical contextualization allows her readers to gain a preliminary understanding of the overall generalization of *Backfischliterature*, a more thorough exploration and critique can be provided regarding the Eurocentric and colonial undertones the novels contain and their implications for adolescent readers. Pfeiffer’s text could also benefit from unpacking the lack of representation of young heroines of colour and/or racial-ethnic identities in the Backfisch genre. Signalling the limited representation in *Backfischliterature* is relevant in addressing cultural myopia and how the perpetual exclusion of females of colour has reinforced a racial hierarchy within womanhood. To conclude, Pfeiffer’s text provides a well-integrated analytic reading of early childhood and adolescence that invites literary enthusiasts to delve into the depths and livelihood of girlhood in the mid 19th century.

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