The Voice of Women: The Start of the Changing Role of Women

It’s no secret that throughout the world’s history women have been considered as the weaker sex; this is mostly due to significantly less opportunities and rights than men. However, since the nineteenth-century, women have fought for a more equal society and a more equal role by accomplishing an impressive amount of goals that increased their opportunities. American women desired equality much earlier than that. Since the early eighteenth century women began to become more dynamic and find their identity and value from themselves rather than the men around them. In the infancy stages of the women’s movement only a bold few were willing to express their dissenting opinion of society’s views about women. Women found their voice for change through writing and literature.

Anne Bradstreet and Elizabeth Ashbridge were two women that pioneered the idea that the role of a woman is much more than that of housewife. Bradstreet wrote a collection of poems titled *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. This collection subtly questioned ideas on male dominance and a woman’s place in a home. Ashbridge kept a journal that explicitly documented her abusive relationship with her husband and through that experience she discusses a woman’s role as a leader and how one can experience freedom from male dominance. Both Ashbridge and Bradstreet’s style are deceptively simple. While it was difficult for women to air their views in their current century, these two women seemed to do it with ease.

Bradstreet is a woman of high intelligence and ideals who is very much in love and has unconditional faith. Throughout Bradstreet’s poetry the love and affection she had for her husband is easily seen. In her poem *To My Dear and Loving Husband*, she writes "I prize thy
love more than whole mines of gold” (Bradstreet 289). She continues to describe her immense love for her husband by stating that all the riches of the East couldn’t measure up to it and a river could not quench her thirsting love for him (289). Puritan women are supposed to be reserved, domestic, and obedient to their husbands. However, Bradstreet is largely challenging this tradition in a subtle way. By praising her husband, showing her loyalty, and strong affection towards him, Bradstreet is being completely unashamed and open. Puritans were supposed to love their husbands, but were not supposed to express their love in this type of public fashion. Bradstreet’s demonstrates this strong love and attachment to her husband by writing, “If ever wife was happy in a man, / Compare with me, ye women, if you can” (289). She publically challenges any woman to try to compare their love with hers, and Bradstreet is convinced it will never measure up to the love she has for her husband. Writing poetry allowed Bradstreet to publically proclaim her feelings as a woman and that was a revolutionary concept for women of this time.

Similarly, Ashbridge challenged traditional female roles and documents them in her spiritual autobiography. The Puritan faith was closed to women, so she turned to other denominations and began to search for spiritual truth. Ashbridge eventually declared herself a Quaker despite marital duty and physical violence from her husband (Castillo and Schweitzer 421). By disassociating herself from her husband’s faith, Ashbridge was not complying with the standard that women should fully submit to their husbands. A woman’s submission to her husband was extremely traditional and one of the core values societies embraced during the early eighteenth century. In her journal, Ashbridge documents the torment she receives from her husband and she writes, “My Husband once in Great rage camp up to me, & Shaking his hand over me, sad, “you had better be hanged in that Day.”” (Ashbridge 427). In this quote Ashbridge
recognizes that abusive treatment from her husband is not acceptable, and she breaks out of the submissive mold of a wife by standing up for herself. Just like Bradstreet, Ashbridge is challenging tradition and finds her voice to do so through writing.

Male dominance over women was very customary during both Ashbridge and Bradstreet’s time periods in history. Bradstreet contradicts this idea in her poem *In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory*. Here she appears to be writing about the greatness of Queen Elizabeth and praising her, but really Bradstreet is showing how women can be superior to men. While discussing Queen Elizabeth’s use of power she writes, “She frankly helped Frank's brave distressed/ king, /The states united now her fame do sing.” (Bradstreet 285). In this passage she is writing about an instance where Elizabeth came to the rescue of the King of France. This puts the Queen in a position of power over a man who is the ruler of a large country and makes the king the subservient character at her mercy.

In lines 25 and 26 she writes: “Who was so good, so just, so learn'd so/ wise,/ From all the kings on earth she won the prize.” (284). Bradstreet is comparing Queen Elizabeth to all the Kings who have come before her, and argues that she is better than they are because of her fairness and intelligence. She continues her argument later when she states, “She hath wip'd off the' aspersion of her sex,/ That women wisdom lack to play the rex.” (284). Here she says frankly that the Queen has completely disproven the wrongful sexist stereotype that women lack the smarts to rule a country. Bradstreet advocates women and demonstrates that they are just as capable as men and can dominate them; she does this all while appearing to be modestly praising the Queen. If it wasn’t for the use of poetry, Bradstreet wouldn’t have been able to deny the idea that men should dominate women. Once again, she uses writing to voice and express her opinions but carefully veils this critique by her feminine role as a wife and mother.
Ashbridge is the ultimate example of a woman who was freed from male dominance. In Ashbridge’s account she writes about her desire to be liberated from her husband in order to make choices according to her conscience and principles (Castillo and Schweitzer 421). Ashbridge resists her husband’s command not to become a Quaker and takes a stand even though he abuses her. In her account she writes about her husband’s reaction to her asking to attend a Quaker meeting by saying, “at which he flew into a rage, saying, “no you can’t… as a Dutyful Wife ought, So I was ready to obey all his Lawfull commands, but where they Imposed upon my Conscience, I no longer Durst” (Ashbridge 428). Ashbridge firmly believed that if her husband’s will for her went against her moral conscience then she would not do what he wants. She goes against her husband’s wishes and attends the meeting and therefore, rejects male dominance. It’s important to recognize Ashbridge’s strength and rebellion through her quest for not only spiritual truth but also for a voice and identity as an independent woman. In contrast, Bradstreet is clear example that a woman can exercise independence even with a husband; and the quotes from her included throughout have made that evident.

Elizabeth Ashbridge and Anne Bradstreet were two women that birthed the start of the American feminist movement by their willingness to be bold and let their voice be heard. They realized that a woman has value and identity that can come from her, not her husband. For Ashbridge, her personal account was a private declaration of desire for freedom from male bondage. Similarly Bradstreet’s poetry echoed Ashbridge’s ideas as she challenges the idea of being submissive to men and male superiority. The literature produced by these two women became the voice of all women during their time periods and their example is still being followed today. Women still struggle to oppose sexism, discrimination, and subversive ideas. However, as in the past, the written word offers freedom and an opportunity to make a change.
Works Cited


