Alienation and Oppression at Home: Feminist and Marxist Critiques

Some of the most powerful critiques of the father’s position within the family home have arguably come from feminist thinkers. The institution of marriage, for instance, has historically been deeply problematic for women – an insight that is memorably expressed by Bathsheba Evere­dene in Thomas Hardy’s Far from the Madding Crowd (1874), when she explains to Liddy, her maid and confidante, why simply to run away from an unhappy marital union does not constitute a viable solution for her:

A runaway wife is an encumbrance to everybody, a burden to herself, and a byword – all of which make up a heap of misery greater than any that comes by staying at home, though this may include the trifling items of insults, beating and starvation. Liddy, if you ever marry – God forbid that you ever should – you’ll find yourself in a fearful situation; but mind this, don’t you flinch. Stand your ground and be cut to pieces. (299)

In a deeply patriarchal society, where married women are seen as belonging to their husbands in the sense of being their rightful property, it seems illusory to Bathsheba that leaving her husband would result in anything as desirable as freedom. On the contrary, for a woman in Victorian Britain such an act would mean enduring consequences that are so severe that it appears preferable to Bathsheba to stay in a home where one is exposed to “insults, beating and starvation” – which is, as feminists have long pointed out, a sadly appropriate description of the kinds of home in which many women have been forced to live (Blunt and Dowling 125–126). In short, true to the belief so memorably expressed in the slogan that ‘the personal is political,’ feminist critics have explored the extent to which the private space of the home is in fact intricately related to, and indeed inseparable from, the gendered division of the public sphere characteristic of patriarchal society.35

One key historical moment in the construction of modern gender difference is the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Jean-Jaques Rousseau, for instance, argued that women were by nature made to be subjugated, dependent on the judgment of men, and unsuited to abstract and speculative thought (Émile 411, 418, and 448) – views vehemently opposed even at the time (e.g. by Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the Rights of Women). As Dorinda Outram points

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35 For a highly accessible introduction to feminist criticism see Pam Morris, Literature and Feminism.
out, the ideas of philosophers like Rousseau attempted to limit women’s sphere to the domestic world, and some historians suggest that industrialization contributed to such a ‘sexual division of labor.’ The association of women with the domestic sphere in fact preceded the period of industrialization, and as Outram notes the true Enlightenment innovation was its use of medical or biological ‘evidence’ to naturalize earlier ideas about gender difference (91). At the same time, Outram continues, women in fact assumed eminently important functions in the creation and maintenance of an Enlightenment public sphere, both as hosts of salons and as authors (94–96). Accordingly, critics like Amanda Vickery have cautioned against the assumption that men and women truly lived in entirely ‘separate spheres’ (413; see Sharon Marcus 6–7; Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity* 168–170).

Nevertheless, there are of course countless literary texts that evoke this ideology of separate spheres, from little-known Victorian novels like Annie Lucas’s *The City and the Castle* (“[F]rom the calm, tender eyes of a noble, loving wife, shone the faithful, comprehensive love, that makes the light of an earthly home”; 427) to African American interwar classics like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (“She’s uh woman and her place is in de home”; 69). Similarly, Ania Loomba has shown that in nationalist struggles against colonial masters, women are “usually cast as mothers or wives, and are called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation” (180). Male nationalists have, in other words, often deployed women’s supposedly private position in the family home for eminently public purposes. The key feminist insight is, in short, that in the critical analysis of home, we need to pay close attention to the way in which home participates in, and perhaps even underpins, the gendering of social space (including the public-private divide).

In the case of *E.T.*, for instance, Phyllis Deutsch argues that Elliott’s mother, Mary, is systematically devalued as a character as part of the film’s promotion of a patriarchal agenda. Deutsch observes, among other things, that the male children in the film never blame the absent father for their parents’ separation. Instead, they lovingly remember the father while directing feelings of frustration at their mother. Moreover, according to Deutsch the film emphasizes Mary’s inadequacy as a single parent in a scene where she calls the police because Elliott has temporarily gone missing:

[A] policeman grills Mary trying to find out if anything has happened in the family that might have caused her son to run away. Mary tearfully replies that her husband has gone and that “it hasn’t been easy on the children.” Clearly, she’s the one at fault: she’s at home and not doing a proper job raising the kids. […] In the viewer’s mind,
The film, Deutsch continues, in effect portrays Mary as a comic buffoon who “constantly misses the obvious,” and the film’s religious infrastructure only serves to support this misogynist bias because it moves “from father to king to God with sweeping grandeur,” leaving “a lot of troubled women in its wake” (12). If Mary, by the end of the film, does seem more emotionally stable, then for Deutsch this is not a sign of her progress as a woman, but instead appears as related to a “nice male scientist” who stands next to Mary in the movie’s final scene (13). All homes, in short, need a competent mother, but for Deutsch E. T. makes the sexist point that female competence ultimately depends on the presence of a male – and although Deutsch’s account of the portrayal of Mary may be somewhat too scathing, her argument certainly supports William Alexander’s more cautious claim that the film’s “sexual politics are not the most advanced” (27).

Crucially, feminism’s insistence that the privacy of the home is inseparable from societal structures of domination constitutes its most direct link to the Marxist tradition, according to which social alienation necessarily affects a person’s entire being. In a sense, this Marxian insight is already encapsulated in the etymology of the word ‘economy,’ which nowadays refers predominantly to public activities in the capitalist market, but which originally derives from the management of the oikos: the Ancient Greek term for ‘household’ or ‘family’ (OED; see McKeon, The Secret History of Domesticity 7–8). Moreover, the importance for classic Marxism to pay close attention to the material shape of the home is evident in Friedrich Engels’s The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844:

I assert that thousands of industrious and worthy people – far worthier and more to be respected than all the rich of London – [...] find themselves in a condition unworthy of human beings; and that every proletarian, everyone, without exception, is exposed to a similar fate without any fault of his own and in spite of every possible effort.
But in spite of all this, they who have some kind of a shelter are fortunate, fortunate in comparison with the utterly homeless. In London fifty thousand human beings get up every morning, not knowing where they are to lay their heads at night. (43–44)

The poor are either homeless or live in the most unworthy conditions, and Engels insists that in such filthy circumstances “only a physically degenerate race, robbed of all humanity, degraded, reduced morally and physically to bestiality, could feel comfortable and at home” (75). Engels argues, then, that the industrial proletariat suffers from such precarious conditions at home that their humanity itself threatens to become deformed.

Meanwhile, if Engels focuses on the material conditions in workers’ homes, Marx turns his attention to the process of production that, he argues, reduces the workers’ sense of belonging or being at home. According to Marx, the force underlying proletarians’ sense of unbelonging is their continual experience of estranged or alienated labor:

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside of himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction

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of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 74; original emphasis)37

Marx thus suggests that all humans have a right to feel at home when at work – indeed, that the freedom to choose one’s work according to one’s abilities and desires constitutes the very essence of humanity as such (whereas animals are not in general able to make such choices; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 74–75).38 However, in Marx’s view, for the vast majority, the capitalist system of production reduces work to a mere means of survival – i.e. to its exchange-value – which in turn leaves the experience of work devoid of any use-value: of the specifically human pleasure that one can gain through creative self-expression.

In the case of *E. T.*, the effects of a social system where exchange-value trumps use-value can be seen most clearly in the technocratic approach of most of the film’s adults to non-human life. The scene at school in which Elliott and his classmates are set the task of anesthetizing and dissecting frogs, for instance, confronts us with a society that inoculates its children with a disregard for other life-forms in the name of scientific knowledge: perfect evidence for Louis Al-