

The Impact of the Feminist Movement and Sisterhood in Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*

Suaad Shaker Mohammad

Prof. Dr. Sabah Atallah Diyaiy

suaads@yahoo.com

Abstract

During the twentieth century, America witnessed major political, economic, and social changes in addition to the appearance of important movements, each with different concerns that shaped the lives of the American people. One of the most essential movements that flourished in the twentieth century is the Feminist Movement, which aims to help the American women to gain their legal as well as social rights and its continuous attempts to end the patriarchal domination over the business field. Though its commitment, yet the Feminist Movement suffered of some failures that affected negatively on most of its women supporters. The research aims to discuss how a true believer in the Feminist Movements and its agenda, ultimately feels disappointed and betrayed as she discovers that the movement does not achieve her dreams and goals of a better future in Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*.

Keywords: Feminist Movement – disillusionment – gender conflict – sisterhood – conscious raising group – commitment.

The Heidi chronicles completes and extends the themes of Wasserstein's other plays that discuss the status of women in the twentieth century as well as the Feminist Movement's impact on their lives. The play focuses on the development of one character rather than several ones. It is mainly a character – driven play, concerning Heidi Holland's life that reflects the changing social and political events from the mid 1960 to the late 1980. Heidi struggles to find her own identity. According to Wasserstein she is “a ‘highly – informed spectator’ who never quite seems to be in step with the prescribed order of the day.”¹ Heidi is a successful art-historian, who is lecturing in Columbia University and is mainly interested in presenting the lives and works of the neglected women artists.

The Heidi Chronicles is about isolation, loneliness, and friendship. The play is also feminist in a structural and aesthetic sense. Feminist critic like Iska Alter notes that the devices used in the play:

Continually pull the action back into the past, producing the ironic gap between promise and realization, hope and disillusion that the events of the play announce.²

While Mimi Kramer points out that the “moving-snapshot style of theatre is most often used to chronicle disillusionments and disappointments.”³ Thus, it is obvious that the main theme of the play is that the procedure of the feminist movement is far from being complete.

The Heidi Chronicles indicates that the members of the baby boom generation have huge hopes that reality frustrates. The play points out that the characters manifest a spiritual of self. In the play, people suffer but they endure the hardships by preparing the next generation to enjoy a better future. Influenced by the feminist ideology, the heroines of Wasserstein's other plays shift their professional options and think of managing a life with both career and marriage. Yet, Heidi on the other hand, is affected by the agenda of her time. She knows from the onset what she wants as she does not compromise her career for marriage.⁴

The chronicles of Heidi could be seen as a “minor epic”⁵ that spans a quarter century of Heidi's life and examines both the pleasures and the pains of the feminism's impact on her and on women as well. Heidi, who is committed to the idealism of feminism, is different from her friends who are swept away by the materialism of the eighties, living the vacuous life they once condemned. This makes Heidi eventually feels stranded.

Therefore, *The Heidi Chronicles* satirically depicts the concerns and conventions of a group of people who expose the marginalization of women, their loss of identity, self-esteem and the loss of idealism in the second wave of feminism during the early sixties. It is usually to find out that the first wave, of the ninetieth and the early twentieth century focused on gaining women's rights for voting. Yet, it changed its agenda in the second half of the twentieth century. The second wave encouraged women to enter the business field strongly above all other interests.⁶

The isolation Heidi feels and its complicated connection to the feminist movement continues to be the chief concern of the play. It examines what happens when a true believer, like Heidi, commits herself to the feminist ideologies then she becomes desperate.

Heidi appears in each of the play's eleven scenes and speaks the prologue of each of the two acts of the play. She, then, represents Wasserstein's points of views about what matters most at her time, especially the feminist movement. The two prologues Heidi speaks are of great importance for their revelation of the status of Heidi in the world and in the midst of the feminist activities.

The prologue of the first act displays Heidi in a lecture hall as she shows slides of paintings that belong to neglected women artists of previous centuries. From the beginning, Heidi offers her opinion about the difference between men and women's sensibility "Clara Peeters used more geometry and less detail than her male peers."⁷(1.161) The difference becomes a metaphor for gender conflict throughout the play. The prologue is in the present time. It works as the conclusion Heidi reaches through the previous years of her life that makes her more confident, more satisfied, and more optimistic about the future.

Heidi shifts her memories from the art lecture back to 1965 high school dance, where she and her friend Susan, talking about young men. Heidi rejects Susan's shallow way of thinking, when she says that the difference between men and women are no more than a biological one:

SUSAN: You know as your best friend, I must tell you frankly that you're going to get really messed up unless you learn to take men seriously.

HEIDI: Susan, there is absolutely no difference between you and me and him. Except that he can twist and smoke at the same time and we can get out gym with an excuse called ... [I am sick]. (1.1.164)

Heidi's quick response is to point out that men are not significant in her life. At that moment, Peter Patrone approaches Heidi asking her to dance with him. Later, she will think of him as a future husband, yet he never thinks of commitment. A song is heard backstage. It is called "Chapel of Love"⁸. It exposes two kinds of women: those like Susan who thinks of men, and Heidi who seeks independence.

But Heidi's opinions about men are sometimes questionable; she is attracted to Scoop Rosenbaum, whom she meets in 1968. Yet, he underestimates her ambition to become an art historian: "That's really suburban." (1.2.171). Then, he mocks women's rights movement:

SCOOP: You mean if, after all the politics, you girls decide to go "hog wild," demanding equal pay, equal rights, ...?

HEIDI: All people deserve to fulfill their potential.

SCOOP: absolutely.

HEIDI: I mean, why should some well-educated woman waste her life making you and your children tuna-fish sand-wiches?

SCOOP: She shouldn't. And, for that matter, neither should a badly educated woman. Heidella, I'm on your side.

HEIDI: Don't call me Heidella. It's diminutive.

SCOOP: You mean “demeaning,” and it's not. It's endearing.

HEIDI: You're deliberately eluding my train of thought.
(1.2.173)

Scoop's words, in fact, highlight the play major concern about the collapse of the women's movement.

The scene shifts to 1970 depicting number of women who gather in a basement to form a circle of sisterhood as an attempt to share their views and problems. They try to find solutions. Susan and Heidi enter; the latter attends such meeting for the first time. When they all pull their chairs to form a circle, Heidi deliberately pulls hers out of the circle and sits behind one of the women, Fran, as a sign of her unwillingness to share her problems with them.

When Fran asks Heidi a question, Heidi's answer is “I'm just visiting.” (1.3.177) Fran quickly comments:

I have to say right now that I don't feel comfortable with a “just visiting” in the room. I need to be able to come here and reach out to you as my sisters. Okay, Heidi-ho? (1.3.177)

Fran reminding the group that:

The only way to turn that [subjugation] around is for us, right here, to try to make that *we* want, that *we* desire to be, as vital as it would undoubtedly be to any man. And then we can go out there and really make a difference! (1.3.181)

Although Fran's words sum up the experience of a large number of women including Heidi, but they do not announce “The terrible sadness

and insecurity all [the] brave talk barely masks.”⁹ Jill, a housewife and a mother of four daughters, believes that she wasted her life with a demanding husband. Becky, a 17 year old student, lives with an abusive boyfriend, says:

I try to be super nice to him. I make all his meals, and I never disagree with him. But then he just gets angry or stoned. So when I need to think things through, I lock the bathroom door and cry. But I try not to make any sound. (1.3.179)

The group's reaction towards Becky's misery forms Heidi's first impression about sisterhood. She joins the group only when Susan says that “My friend Heidi is obsessed with an ...”(1.3.180) But Heidi immediately declares that the matter is “personal” (1.3.180) Jill instantly replies:

“Personal” has kept us apart for so many years. “personal” means I know what I'm doing is wrong, but I have so little faith in myself, I'm going to keep it a secret and right on doing it. (1.3.180)

Fran becomes the spokesperson using her ideology against patriarchy to encourage positive feminist attitude:

Heidi, every woman in this room has been taught that the desires and dreams of her husband, her son, or her boss are much more important than her own.(1.3.181)

Inspired by the strength of sisterhood, Heidi finally decides to talk. Calling Scoop “a charismatic creep” who “dates a lot of women”, and stays “aloof” when “I need him” (1.3.181-182), Heidi is encouraged by the support and compassion she receives from the group: “the problem isn't really him. The problem is me. I could make a better choice.” (1.3.182) and that it is not only male behavior, but the way that women have been socialized to relate to men, that results in a lack of self-esteem for women. She continues to say:

I keep allowing this guy to account for so much of what I think of myself. ... I know that's wrong. I would tell any friend that's wrong. (1.3.181)

Aware of the problem, Heidi cannot solve it herself: “if I decide to get better and leave him, he's unbelievably attentive.” (1.3.182) Heidi hopes

that their “daughters never feel like us. I hope all our daughters feel so... worthwhile.” (1.3.182) asking Fran at the end if they will meet again.

At the meeting, Susan thinks of a law journal that defends women's rights, still she has “to work within the male establishment power base to change the system.” (1.3.178) But Fran laments her by either be a feminist or not. This scene asks whether women are selling out if they do not abandon the system that oppresses them.

The depiction of “Consciousness Raising”¹⁰ group is represented through the women meeting. It was originally founded by New York Radical Women, in New York City, and quickly spread all over the United States.¹¹ Unfortunately, however, sisterhood does not quite turn into what Heidi expects. According to Bette Mandl, the consciousness raising scene “evokes the images of sisterhood that had prevailed during that... phase of feminism.”¹² Wasserstein realizes what Heidi does not: that although “female friendships are at all costs to be protected ... they generally, no matter how close, become secondary in each other's lives and move on.”¹³ The play's first clue to this is that except for Susan, the women of the group never show up again in the play.

But more importantly, although Susan remains in Heidi's life, she ultimately disappoints Heidi more than any of the other women in the play and proves to be the most devastating relapse to Heidi's sense of sisterhood. Susan is swept by the materialistic spirit of the age. She tells Heidi in their last scene together that “I've been so many people, I don't know who I am.” (2.3.224) According to Bette Mandl:

Susan has left behind all that Heidi still believes in. she has moved into ‘the system.’ The sense of betrayal and abandonment Heidi feels is precisely that of someone who had counted on family loyalty, the ongoing support of sisters, above all.¹⁴

In fact, Susan never genuinely attempts to listen to Heidi or help her. The betrayal of feminism is related to the betrayal of their friendship. Though Susan turns out to be an unreliable friend, she illustrates the transformation of feminism from idealism to materialism, from the gathering of the women groups in 1970 to the gathering of power groups in 1980.

Heidi's sense of alienation reaches its climax during her long speech, "Women, Where Are We Going," (2.4.228), in the fourth scene of the second act. According to Wasserstein this is "probably the kernel of the play"¹⁵. Heidi expresses the frustration in her speech at the Miss Crain's School East Coast Alumnae Association in 1986. The speech starts comically as Heidi sets herself to be an example of an exhausted superwoman who did not prepare a formal speech before today because of many reasons which is listed satirically by her as she begins:

Well, you might be thinking, this is a women's meeting, so let's give her the benefit of the doubt. After teaching at Colombia yesterday, Miss Holland probably attended a low-impact aerobics class ... picked up her children from school, ... On returning home, she immediately prepared grilled mesquite free-rang chicken ... advised her investment-banker well-rounded husband on future finances ... put the children to bed ... finished writing ten pages of a new book, ... read forty pages of the *Inferno* in Italian, took a deep breath and put out the light. So after all this, we forgive Miss Holland for not preparing a speech today. She's exemplary and exhausted. (2.4.229)

In the middle of her speech, Heidi remembers the lives of seven women who attended besides her a recent exercise class. They represent a section of middle-class women. Heidi experiences an intolerable discomfort and alienation that bursts out at the moment she is trapped and the contents of her bags flow away in that exercise room, "and out of my bag flew a week's worth of change, raspberry gum wrappers, and *Alexander Pope on the Picturesque*" (2.4.230). Heidi continues:

I began giggling. "Oh." ... "I'm sorry." ... "I'm sorry I don't wear leather pants." ... "I'm sorry I don't eat brown rice." ... "I'm sorry I don't want you to find out I'm worthless. And superior." I'm

embarrassed—no, humiliated—in front of every woman in that room. (2.4.231)

Substantially, Heidi is acknowledging that she is a lonely woman and she wants to be included in a group, but she cannot go along with others.

The absence of men in her speech confirms that Heidi's anger and frustration has less to do with them, and that what she feels is mainly because of the betrayal and disloyalty of her women companions whom she once called sisters. The women in the locker room are merely just a small number in a list of those who entered and left Heidi's life suddenly. Heidi feels betrayed by those who lost contact with the feminist idealism. Heidi comments at the end of her speech:

I don't blame the ladies in the locker room for how I feel. I don't blame any of us. ...It's just that I feel stranded. And I thought the whole point was that we wouldn't feel stranded. I thought the point was that we were all in this together. (2.4.232)

Wasserstein believes that Heidi's alienation results from disintegrated sisterhood:

Made options available to women that previous generations could not imagine. But that's the personal pursuit. That is not the 'We'.... What's missing is the 'We'.¹⁶

More important, says John Beaufort, once they

Triumphed in their battles 'to be me,' the friends of the encounter sessions seem to have forgotten the ideals they once cherished, and concentrated instead on advancing their careers and realizing their personal ambitions.¹⁷

Actually, Heidi answers the question of the speech "Women, Where Are We Going" with Nowhere.

Wasserstein wrote an affirmative ending to the play. With Heidi's adoption a baby girl named Judy. This unexpected ending shows that Heidi

and her daughter represent the future generation of women who hope to have a stronger sense of self-worth in a more equal society, without any discrimination. Judy, then, represents according to her mother's words, "A heroine for the twenty-first" (2.6.248) century. Thus, the scene of adoption is a fitting conclusion which does not work as a criticism of feminism or its failure but it is a celebration of its unfinished works and its future victories.

Notes

¹ Carl Rollyson, Ed. *Notable Playwrights: Volume 3, George Ryga-Paul Zindel* (California: Salem Press Inc. 2005) p. 991

² Brenda Murphy, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* (New York: Cambridge University Press.1999) P.221

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gail Ciociola, *Wendy Wasserstein: Dramatizing Women, Their Choices and Their Boundaries* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers. 1998) P. 59

⁵ Ibid., p. 56

⁶ Jan Balakian, *Reading the Plays of Wendy Wasserstein* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books. 2010) P. 82

⁷ Wendy Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles, Uncommon Women and Others and Isn't It Romantic* (New York: Vintage Books. 1991). All subsequent quotations from this play are taken from this edition and enclosed within the text with parentheses.

⁸ "Chapel of Love" a song written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Phil Spector, and made famous by The Dixie Cups in 1964, spending three weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot 100. The song tells of the happiness and excitement the narrator feels on her wedding day, for she and her love are going to the "chapel of love", and "we'll never be lonely anymore."

⁹ Gail Ciociola, p. 65

¹⁰ "Consciousness Raising" are groups meant helping oneself and helping others to become politically conscious. The groups aimed to better understand women's oppression by bringing women together to discuss and analyze their lives, without interference from men. Jan Balakian, p. 90

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gail Ciociola, p. 66

¹³ Ibid., p. 67

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 71

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 73

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 75

تأثير الحركة النسوية والتضامن النسوي في مسرحية

وندي وازرشتن سجل تاريخ هايدي

بحث مستل من لطالبة الماجستير سعاد شاكر محمد

بإشراف ا.د. صباح عطا الله ضيائي

كلية التربية - ابن رشد / قسم اللغة الانجليزية

الملخص

خلال القرن العشرين، شهدت امريكا تغيرات اساسية على الصعيد السياسي، الاقتصادي، والاجتماعي بالإضافة الى ظهور حركات مهمة، كل مع اهتمامات مختلفة والتي صاغت حياة الناس الامريكيين. واحدة من أهم الحركات الاساسية والتي ازدهرت في القرن العشرين هي الحركة النسوية والتي تهدف لمساعدة النساء الأمريكيات للحصول على حقوقهن القانونية كما والاجتماعية و محاولاتها المستمرة لإنهاء الهيمنة الذكورية على مجال الاعمال. وبالرغم من التزامها اتجاه مؤيديها، الا ان الحركة النسوية عانت من بعض الاخفاقات والتي اثرت سلبيا على اغلبية النساء المؤيدات للحركة. يهدف البحث لمناقشة كيف ان مؤمنة حقيقية بالحركة النسوية وبرامجها، تشعر بالخيبة والخيانة في نهاية المطاف عند اكتشافها ان الحركة لا تحقق احلامها واهدافها لعيش مستقبل افضل في مسرحية وندي وازرشتن سجل تاريخ هايدي

كلمات رئيسية: الحركة النسوية - خيبة الأمل - الصراع بين الجنسين - التضامن النسوي - مجموعة زيادة الوعي - الالتزام