Changes in the Representation of Heroines:
Australian Women’s Writings from the
1880s~1990s

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I. Introduction

Early radical feminists understood traditional patriarchal gender relations as a root cause of women’s oppression, thus they sought to abolish this patriarchy and to alter views on the prevailing social arrangement. Kate Millet was one of these early feminists who saw the patriarchy playing the most influential role in building a fundamental hierarchical power structure upon human relationships (qtd. in Tong, 147). Linda Woodbridge and L. Stone, who studied the historical aspect of women’s status in Elizabethan England, also criticized patriarchy and showed how Elizabethan marriages revealed discrimination against women. According to their argument, women were regarded as weak and inferior to men, and this has led society to accept the patriarchal perception of women as a family possession under men’s authority (qtd. in Kim, 66). Lisa Jardin also pointed out the imposed virtue of women in patriarchy, that women’s virtue was regarded as obedience towards men, as something natural and that this was perhaps the expression of a typical deep male distrust for women and the wish for their subordination (67). Feminist critics since then have continued to develop various theories revealing discrimination towards women in order to criticize patriarchy. They have adopted and
modified current philosophical trends and issues to shape and adjust their arguments to reprimand patriarchal authority. The development of feminist thinking has passed through various stages such as psychoanalysis feminism, social feminism and existential feminism. In particular, by the late twentieth century feminist thinkers were being influenced by post-modern thought and they applied post-modern de-constructive theories to call for the emancipation of women from patriarchy. Although in the early days some feminists rejected the term "postmodernism" as too vague to be applied as a solution for the problematic gender construct, the French feminists, as psychoanalytical theorists, argued for the use of post-modern principles to reinterpret the relationship between power and language, and to reconsider the meaning and determination of sexuality between the different sexes.

This paper aims to look closely at this development of feminist theories against patriarchy during the late nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries. What this paper will show is a gradual change in the thoughts and theories which enables us to witness different approaches to the problem. One very interesting way to observe this gradual emergence of the feminist movement is through some of the literary texts of the time, since literature both reflects and shapes the society from which it originates. I have selected three novels from nineteenth century and twentieth century Australia which, individually and together, reveal much about the changes that both society and feminism have experienced. The three novels chosen here were all written by female Australian authors whose genuine intentions were to reveal and reflect on women's struggle for freedom, independence and equal opportunities.

The three novels written by Australian women writers are: Rosa Praed’s *The Bond of Wedlock*, Drusila Modjeska’s *Poppy* and Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone*. The first novel, *The Bond of Wedlock* relates the problems and conflicts within patriarchal marital systems as the point of departure for feminist criticism. Written in 1886, this novel illustrates the heroine’s misery in her marriages with violent partners. It also hints at the importance of women’s financial independence, thus indirectly criticizing the woman under patriarchy who seeks to marry primarily for

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