



The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature

Sarah Appleton Aguiar

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Although the “bitch” has always commanded a prominent spot in popular culture—television, movies, art—she virtually disappeared from the work of the second wave of feminist writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Now, announces Sarah Appleton Aguiar, the bitch is back, returned once more to cultural center stage in the world of serious literature.

Feminist writers such as Mary Gordon and Alice Walker, to name only two, felt obligated to subvert literary misrepresentations of females as dimensionless, to refute preconceptions of objectified characters, and, of paramount importance, to create memorable women full of complexity and character. They wanted to create a subjective reality for their protagonists. And they succeeded admirably.

But along the road to subjectivity, that vital woman, empowered with anger, with ruthless survival instincts—the bitch—was banished from the pages of feminist fiction. The village gossips, calculating gold-diggers, merciless backstabbers, sinful sirens, evil stepmothers, deadly daughters, twisted sisters, hags, bags, and crones—all had vanished from the fiction written by women. Ubiquitous in other forms of media, the bitch was noticeably absent from the feminist literary canon.

Aguiar, however, points to indications in contemporary culture that the season of the bitch is fast approaching. Contemporary feminist writers and theorists are making substantial reevaluations of the archetypal bitch. Focusing on the traits and the types of guises usually associated with this vital character, Aguiar discusses such characters as Zenia in Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*, Ruth Patchett in Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Sula in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, and Ginny in Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*.

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