Esther: A Feminist Approach

Introduction

Esther, a woman that plays a very important role in the Bible, is an interesting character to analyze with feminist criticism due to the misconceptions that people have about the role of women in Christianity. Today, many churches debate whether women should be able to hold a leadership positions. An answer to this debate can be better understood after examining the book of Esther to see how gender is constructed in the artifact and whether she is a transformation to the ideology of domination. In doing do, hegemony, or the character or character group who holds the power will also be revealed. The role of Esther in saving the Jews can be analyzed to illustrate a clear picture of the construction of gender and the concept of domination of women in society.

Artifact Summary

The story of Esther takes place at the Shushan palace in 512 B.C. beginning with Ahasuerus, the king, in reign with his queen, Vashti. After Vashti is disobedient, she is removed from the throne and Esther, a Jewish queen, takes her place. Around this time, Haman, one of the officials of the king, plots to kill all Jews and wants every person to bow to him, but Mordecai refuses, making him a targeted enemy of Haman. At this point, Esther is given the opportunity to save the Jews. Esther has the best chance at convincing the king of anything, so she approaches the king about Haman’s plan and as a result is able to save her people. Out of the king’s disgust with Haman, he is killed by the gallow
that he created to kill others. While Esther played an important part in saving the Jews, it is important to analyze the power that she held.

**Feminist Method of Criticism**

The purpose of feminist criticism is to determine how gender is constructed throughout a story. To be specific, the criticism should analyze the role of women in order to see how it measures up with the feminist ideology of equality and a movement toward self-determination for women (Foss 151). After discovering the role of gender in the story, the focus will turn to whether the role supports the ideology of domination. Feminist criticism focuses on which gender is holding domination. By carefully analyzing the actions and dialogue of both the males and females in the story, a conclusion can be met that discovers which party is dominating in the story based on the construction of gender. Feminist criticism does not only bring about awareness of literature about women, but analyzes the importance of gender socialization and the ability to have persuasive impact (Amador 210). This type of criticism is broad and is not limited to any type of text (Showalter 30). Feminist Criticism is described as being “rather a powerful movement than a unified theory, a community of women with a shared set of concerns but with a complex and resourceful variety of methodological practices and theoretical affiliations” (Showalter 29-30). Basically, any type of text can be used with any type of theory and construct the gender from the way that women are portrayed. The construction of gender is very important for a feminist criticism and sets the basis for understanding the role of domination.

**Construction of Gender**
Esther was preceded in her role as queen by the gentile queen, Vashti. In the first chapter of Esther, Vashti is still in reign and the reason why her position in royalty is taken from her illustrates a clear construction of gender. In just the first chapter of the story, much is told about the role of women before Esther. The story begins with a feast held by king Ahasuerus, but interestingly, the banquet is only for the princes and nobles of the provinces (Esther 1:3). Vashti, the queen has a separate feast for the women of the royal house that “belonged to king Ahasuerus” (Esther 1:9). The women and the men are segregated until king Ahasuerus decides that he would like to show off his queen. In verse 11 it says, “To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on” (Esther 1:11). In this verse, Vashti is depicted as a sexual object for men. However, she refuses to comply with his request and is banished from her throne. King Ahasuerus thought that her refusal would cause all women to despise their husbands and that it would not be appropriate to keep her as queen, but that she should be replaced by someone better than she (Esther 1:17-19).

In order to find a new queen, the king’s officers gathered together all the fair young virgins to the palace of Shushan. However, it says, “And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti” (Esther 2:17). In accordance to king Ahasuerus’ reputation, he chose a queen that would please him, making it seem as though the sole purpose of women is to please men or to provide pleasure for them. King Ahasuerus was not aware that Esther was Jewish
though, it says, “Esther had not yet shewed her kindred nor her people…” (Esther 2:20).

Esther shows bravery and rebellion by hiding her identity from the king.

The next move by Esther begins to change the way gender is constructed in the story. Esther is asked by Mordecai, her uncle, to save the Jews. Haman, appointed by the king, has sent letters to all of the provinces ordering all Jews to be killed (Esther 4:8).

However, Esther responds initially with apprehension, she says,

All the king’s servants, and the people of the king’s provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come into the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden scepter, that he may live: but I have not been called to come into the king these thirty days (Esther 4:11).

The important part about this chapter is that a male is coming to a female for help in a situation. Mordecai decides that only Esther, the queen, can save them from Haman by her gentle approach to the king. Esther agrees to go to the king, she is willing to give her life in attempt to save her people, she says, “…if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16).

After one banquet with Esther, the king, and Haman, she finally had the opportunity to tell the king her request. At both of the banquets, she finds favor with the king and he asks her what petitions she might have. At the second request, she responds, “If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish” (Esther 7:3,4). Immediately, the king reacts to her request and orders Haman to be taken out and killed on the gallow that he had created to hang Mordecai. While the power was in the hands of the king, Esther was brave enough
to make the request. Her physical beauty is valued very highly by the king throughout the story, but her beauty gained her favor to get her request.

The personality and actions of Esther throughout the story picture construct how gender is viewed. Basically, women are highly valued by men to look upon and to bring pleasure. However, with those qualities, she was able to have a better advantage for getting a favorable answer from her request. To be specific, Mordecai could not approach the king because he would not have gained favor like Esther. As soon as Esther walked into the presence of the king, he was reminded of how much she pleased him; she was favorable to look upon. Men would not have this same advantage to the king, or to other men. Still true today, a daughter has a slight advantage over a son with the father because of her beauty and grace. Throughout the rest of the book, requests of Esther continue to be met by the king, she asks that the letters be reversed, that the ten sons of Haman be hung on the gallows, and the time of Purim is even named by the king for the Jews (Esther 9:1-32). Women are viewed as having a quiet strength in this book. While the king made all of the decisions, Esther was prompting him to make them, because he wanted to please her. In the article, *Feminist Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, it is concluded, “that feminists must be careful, that humility and caution are required and that the zeal of feminist activism must be tempered by awareness of one’s limitations in local, cultural knowledge” (Superson & Brennan 8). This is true for Esther because she had to be aware that the king had the final say and she must not overrule her authority. The position of domination is identified when considering authority boundaries.

**Ideology of Domination**
The idea of domination in this story is interesting due to many opinions about the role of women in religious denominations. According to Brym, “Some Protestant denominations encourage women to assume positions of religious authority, while at the other extreme, Islam forbids it” (100). However, since this feminist criticism is on a story from the Bible, the way that the woman is portrayed will be in align with the biblical role of women. First, it is important to briefly identify that role.

The woman described in Proverbs 31 is a worker and sells her goods (31:13, 24), she is clothed in strength and honor (31:25), she opens her mouth with wisdom and kindness (31:26), she looks after her household (31:27), and she is called blessed by her children and husband (31:28). This woman is very highly valued by her family and those around her. In verse 10, it says, “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies” (Proverbs 31:10). The Bible also says that a woman is to be in subjection to her husband and that the beauty of the women would not be from the wearing of gold, but the inside. Peter says, “Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the hear, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (1 Peter 3:3-4). Paul teaches in Titus about women also, he says,

The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they man teach the young women to be sober, to live their husbands, to live their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed (Titus 2:3-5).
Paul also mentions several women that were fellow laborers in the church and for Christ Jesus that were very valuable to the Lord (Romans 16:1-8).

Esther is highly valued by the king whether it is because it says that she is pleasing to him. According to Foss, domination is in the hands of the gender whose interests are best met throughout the story (159). In line with that description, Esther is in domination because she gets what she wants: the Jews are saved. However, she holds a slightly different role because she is not shown as being able to make the decision herself, but she must approach the king. This action is very much in accordance to biblical role of women (to be in subjection to husbands). Since the power is in the hands of the king, hegemony belongs to men in the story and the dominance belongs to the Esther. The story of Esther shows how incredibly valuable women are to the God. While women are expected to be obedient, they are also valued and blessed (like it says in Proverbs) for their obedience. Esther could have tried to take the problem into her own hands, but instead she did not usurp the authority of king Ahasuerus and he asked her what he could to do please her. Esther is a beautiful example for women because she is a combination of submission, wisdom, and heroism. Essentially, Esther saved the Jews because she was granted anything by the king, the one who held the power.

**Conclusion**

The role that Esther plays in the story is interesting because although she does not hold the authority, or hegemony, she is in domination because her desires are met by the king. The actions of Esther portray women in a way that shows an ability to have strength, while power is in the position of a male. The feminist criticism method analyzes the text in order to draw conclusions regarding the role of women. In the case of Esther,
her position is rather unordinary; however, when compared to the biblical responsibility of women, it is very similar. Esther is able to save the Jews because she plays her part in the story with perfect balance.
Works Cited


