

Women's Roles on the Great Plains

A Review Essay by Crystal Ridl

Butler, Anne M. *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865 – 90*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

Nelson, Paula M. *After the West was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986.

Riley, Glenda. *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988.

Rolvaag, O.E. *Giants in the Earth*. New York: Harper and Row, 1927.

Scarborough, Dorothy. *The Wind*. University of Texas Press, 1925.

The Great American West was seen as a place where rugged men capitalized on the land and freedom the West had to offer. It was not a place where women thrived. It was too difficult of a life for them to endure. In reality though, this was not the case. There were many women who endured what the West had to offer. In fact, many of them led very happy and successful lives in the West. The reality then is that despite the hardships of settling on the Great Plains women were very vital to the development of the Great American West.

In her book, *After the West was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota*, Paula M. Nelson focuses on the development of what was considered “the last frontier” in the United States. The reason it was called this was because western South Dakota was one of the last areas to be settled. She explains in great detail the trials and tribulations along with the successes that the settlers endured while settling here. They faced blizzard and droughts, but they also found some success in starting their farms and towns in this area.

Throughout the book, Nelson does a wonderful job of pointing out women's as well as men's roles in this area. In fact she often uses stories or quotes from women to further develop the idea she is discussing at a certain point in the book. An example of this would be when she discusses how lonely it could be on the plains, she has a quote from Fanny Malone who settled in Lyman County. Fanny said,

The Burroughs and Tom Way families were our nearest neighbors on the west, and often I would look across to see if I could see the lamplight shining through some window through the night. "Social watchfires answering one another through the darkness." (62)

Isolation and loneliness were not the only things though that Nelson points out as a struggle for women on the plains. Many of these women lived in very small and crudely built houses. Edith and Ida Mary Ammons described their house as a "none too substantial packing-box tossed haphazardly on the prairie which crept in at its door" (27). Many of the women also feared the things that nature had to offer. The weather in winter could be dangerous, but the summers could also be very hot and dry. Along with the weather though, many women feared snakes, coyotes, and other animals of the Plains.

According to Nelson, many women and families overcame these fears though and homesteaded on the Plains. They were able to persevere by doing things such as making their homes more comfortable. They would use their possessions such as rugs and pictures to make their homes more like their old one. Beyond their homes, women did many things to overcome their fears and loneliness. They created many different groups such as church groups and ladies aids. They also played a vital role in their neighbor's lives by helping in times of need such as illness, childbirth, or death.

One final point that Nelson points out about women's roles in the west is that many of them worked outside their homes as well. A good number of women became

teachers, dressmakers, “hotel maids, cooks, waitresses, office help, store clerks, hired girls and mail carriers” (48). If women did not work outside their homes then they often sold eggs or butter to help bring in some form of income.

Nelson writes about the settlement of this area as well as women’s roles in a very easy to read manner. She often uses actual stories instead of just historical data which engages the reader in the text. The stories and quotes offer a perspective that could not be seen any other way. She also laid out the book in a very easy to follow pattern. Each chapter builds on the ones before it to give a complete view of how life was for the people that homesteaded in western South Dakota.

Glenda Riley also gives a very complete history of women’s roles in the West in her book, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains*. She goes into great detail about every aspect of women’s lives and responsibilities as they settled in this area. She discusses the different roles women took such as homemaker and wife as well as other jobs women took. The fears women had and the social lives they led were also covered in depth. For the most part, she does not write about anything different than Nelson, but she does cover them more in depth.

One thing that is different though is that Riley talks about different ethnicities that settled in the west. Nelson only talks about the white women that settled in South Dakota. Riley discusses the role of blacks, Orientals, and others. This provides a broader view of the West and shows that it was not only a “white” area.

Riley’s writing is easy to follow and is interesting to read. The one problem in the book though is how it is set up. She sets up her book by talking first about an aspect of life on the prairie and then goes over the same aspect on the plains. While this is

effective because she is doing a comparative view, the book tended to be very repetitive. It seemed as though the back to back chapters were saying pretty much the same thing.

A book that offered a completely different insight into the roles of women in the West was Anne M. Butler's *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865 – 90*. Butler begins her book by discussing many of the same jobs the other two books mention. She says that many women were teachers, dressmakers, milliners, and so forth. The problem though was that many women could not secure jobs in these areas. Instead, "for some frontier women work in prostitution best suited their economic chances and interests" (3).

Butler explains prostitution in depth throughout the book. She covers different ethnicities as well as urban versus rural settings and how the prostitution differed in these areas. Beyond this she goes into great depth about the lives that many of the prostitutes led. She discusses issues such as marriage and prostitution, the way the prostitutes were treated, and the places these women sought out. Like Nelson, Butler uses personal stories to add to the effect of her book. This makes all the information she is giving really come alive and adds a personal touch to it.

For the most part the book is very well written. One thing that draws away from it once and awhile is that it seems as if Butler strays from the main points. She discusses the military and legal entanglements prostitutes encountered. In these chapters she does not always stay right with prostitution but gives more background information than may be needed in a book that is supposed to focus on prostitution.

The first three pieces are all historical writing. Another way to look at the role of women is to look at historical fiction and see how these stories tie into the historical

research that has been done. One book that shows the role women played in homesteading in the west is O.E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. This book exemplifies many of the ideas related in the historical writing. One such idea is women's role in helping other women especially in times of difficulty. In the book when Beret has her child, the two other women in the settlement must help her because there is no doctor available. Per Hansa, her husband, has no part in the birth at all. At another point in the book, Beret helps a woman who has lost a child. She and her husband have been traveling across the plains and come across Per Hansa and Beret. They stay the night and Beret identifies with the woman and her feelings of insanity. They seem to have a bond that helps them cope with the situation.

Another similarity between this book and the historical writing is the things that the people, especially the women, on the plains feared. This historical writing pointed out that the creatures of the plains and the weather both caused fear and problems for the settlers. In the book, the settlers feel that the grasshoppers are a plague sent upon them by God. They also endure many terrible winters which take many of their lives culminating in the end by taking the life of two of the main characters. The Indians were also a large source of fear. One character, Kjersti, especially feared them. It was said that, "fear of the Indians was ever vividly present in her mind. Not a day passed that she didn't search the sky line many times" (62).

One thing that seems to take a larger part in this book than in the historical writing is how life on the plains caused some women to go insane. Some of the historical writing mentioned it briefly, but it was not discussed in detail. Rolvaag shows an interesting side to life on the plains by having Beret go insane for a portion of the book. She is unable to

deal with the loneliness and isolation of living on the plains. “A sense of desolation so profound settled upon her that she seemed unable to think at all” (38). The height of her insanity came with the grasshoppers. She was so terrified that she locked herself and her youngest children in a chest. She does “pull out” of this desolation only to turn to being fanatically religious.

Rolvaag is able to really pull all the parts of settling the west into his novel. It is truly masterful in the way it tells the story of these settlers. It gave a story to the history of the west. The women in this story exemplified many of the struggles and successes that the women of the west truly went through. They bore children, managed households, and dealt with the terrors of this desolate land.

Another fictional novel that discusses the role women played in the west was Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind*. This book though was much different than *Giants in the Earth*. The book focuses on a young girl, Letty, whose becomes an orphan and ends up moving to Texas to live with her cousin. She is not happily welcomed by her cousin Bev’s wife. In fact, Cora despises her interfering in their lives. She ends up marrying a man, Lige, just to get out of Cora and Bev’s house. As the novel goes on, Letty can not handle what life has dealt her, and she goes insane.

This book does not go as in-depth into what it was like as people settled the plains. It does show the role that women had to play in taking care of their homes and children though. Cora takes her responsibility as the one to manage the household very seriously. This role is also seen when Letty married Lige and had to try to maintain that household. She was not used to this having grown up in Virginia with servants. She

must learn to cook, clean and do laundry despite the fact she has never done any of these things before. This is the role of the plain's wife as seen in most writings.

The main focus of this book, that fits with other writings, is the fear and loneliness that many of the settlers faced. The loneliness that Letty feels constantly overwhelms her. She "felt as if she were in a vacuum, a solitude so vast that no voice, no life, no motion, could break the awful spell – in a world from which all living creatures save herself had fled" (288). Letty's fear of the wind also overwhelms her to the point where she goes insane. She says that, "It has ruined my looks, my nerves, and my disposition. It's trying to break me, and it will get me yet!" (302). By the end of the book, she blames the wind for the fact that she shot a man. "Nobody ought to hold a crazy person responsible for what he did, and the wind had made her crazy. She must think fast, before it started up again, because the wind did things to her brain that wouldn't let her think" (313).

This book gives an interesting look at what settling the plains was like. The storyline was somewhat engaging, but it lacked some of the depth that *Giants in the Earth* had. The focus is primarily on Letty going insane because of the wind and so many of the other elements of settling the plains were left out. While this book was a good read, it does not provide the reader with a lot of history.

As one can see through many of the writings available, women were definitely part of the development of the West. There were different roles that the women played, but nonetheless they were a vital part. There is a saying that it is not always the man, but the woman behind the man, that makes things successful. The West was an area that was

dominated by men, but the women that were behind them helped to shape the history of the West as well.