

**EMBRACING CULTURAL FEMINISM: DRAWING PARALLELS THROUGH A
TRANSATLANTIC FRIENDSHIP IN 84, CHARING CROSS ROAD**

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Abstract

Cultural feminism celebrates perspective of women and ideas that set them a class apart from the other gender. In *84, Charing Cross Road*, the protagonist's perspective of many aspects of life gives us an insight into the yesteryears. This article aims at exploring Helene's character which is quite compelling and unique. So is her camaraderie with Frank. Through Helene's bravery and generousness, values of cultural feminism are upheld. The transatlantic friendship that spanned a decade speaks volumes about Helene's and Frank's inherent nature. Set in the war period, the story also gives us a glimpse of how hard it was for a common man to make ends meet. Helene chose to do what she could to save her friend and his family from drowning. And Frank was mature enough to set aside his male ego and accept the favors bestowed upon him. He had long since resigned to fate. However, when help came in the form of friendship, he didn't let his vanity ruin things for his family. Helene was a woman of grit and courage. She was also very well learned and cultured. This paper sheds light on Helene's determination in lending a helping hand to her friend in need and she does that without hurting Frank's ego. Also, all along she was very particular that her friendship with Frank remained untarnished.

Keywords:

Cultural feminism, Camaraderie, Transatlantic, 84 Charing cross road.

Introduction

Helene Hanff (April 15, 1916–April 9, 1997) was an American writer. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she is best known as the author of the book *84 Charing Cross Road*, which became the basis for a play, teleplay, and film of the same. Helene Hanff, whose wittily acerbic 20-year correspondence with a London bookseller she never met won her a passionate following after it was published as the epistolary memoir "*84, Charing Cross Road*," died on Wednesday at the De Witt Nursing Home in Manhattan. She was 80 (Fox).

This book, written and published after World War 2, reflects the social viewpoints through real life characters and what transpired between two friendly souls who navigated time finding comfort in each other's letters. So, this piece of work falls under the contemporary literature category. This article is written based on the analysis of social relevance and revolutionary feminist ideas that brought about monumental changes in the society.

The story begins with Helene's search for a copy of an old book. She is a literature enthusiast and is constantly on the lookout for rare collection of books. She gets to know about Frank's bookstore through an advertisement and writes to him requesting him for a copy of a book. Frank, being a very good and decent man agrees to help her fetch one and he does it in a short time. Helene is quite

impressed by the service and from then on, they correspond through letters. Initially, the letters had a formal tone. Over a period of time, they become good friends and get to know about each other's lives. When Helen gets to know of the critical living conditions in England as it was war time, she chooses to help Frank by sending across goodies whenever possible. She also sends stuff for others working in the bookstore. Everyone is touched by her kindness and hence she earns their goodwill. She also befriends Frank's wife and his family. They bonded over letters for a good 10 years after which sadly, Frank dies of illness. She never had enough money to visit London. Eventually when she gets a chance to visit, Frank is no more. However, she is so warmly greeted by his family. Also, there is a brass plate bearing the name, 84, Charing Cross Road hung on the wall of a shop which housed the bookstore eons ago.

Exploring Cultural Feminism through Helene:

Cultural feminism glorifies women's thought process and claims that it is in every way superior to men's. It started in 1970's when some woman decided to end patriarchy and let women get free off the clutches of society that kept dictating terms to them. This theory demands that more emphasis be laid on women's perspectives as they are of greater value. Cultural feminism aimed at rewriting the norms of the society that held men in high regard. Cultural feminists wanted to reclaim the feminist essence. Cultural feminists Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich argued that feminine essence had been falling prey to male aggression since time immemorial. The reason they cited was that men wanted to feel superior as deep down they knew that they had no other choice, but to depend on women as only she has the power to bring a life on this earth. While male characteristic features like aggression, domination can harm the peace of a society, women's traits like compassion, co-operation, gentle nature, will power can bring about positive changes ("Cultural Feminism").

Helene as a Separatist:

Essential feminism emphasizes that men and women are not actually equal. However, the differences between them make them unique. Separatist feminism- Women work with her best possible productivity when left on her own. When men don't become thorns in the path, a woman does her best. Women need spaces that are wholly their own, so they can fully thrive in their own creative, safe environments free from male participation and involvement. Cultural feminism believes that women's culture may originate from either biology or society. For example, women get labeled more gentler and pacifist in nature, meaning they would make better leaders. Or women have a closer connection with the Earth and are, therefore, parallel with nature, making them better at making environmental-based decisions or considering the future of humankind. Cultural feminism works to redefine the previously held notions of what defines strength. While many traits of a woman are regarded weakness, the society doesn't understand that those same qualities are essential in bringing about positive changes. For example, traits like emotional intelligence and sentimentality are socially beneficial. So, all in all, cultural feminism is about at revaluing and redefining attributes culturally ascribed to femaleness ("Cultural Feminism").

Her heroic endeavors as a Cultural Feminist:

In 84, Charing Cross Road, there is no man in Helen's life to stop her from doing what she wanted to. She was not under someone's control. She is independent and there is zero male

interruption. She thrives really well as she is on her own. Helene had a heart of gold. Her heart went out to the people of London who were struggling for basic needs. It is her compassion that brought joy to many a household in London. It is her love and care, which the patriarchal society labelled weakness that laid foundation for a friendship that withstood the test of times. She had a way with words. All her letters were laced with emotions. Even when she wrote requesting for books, there was a lot of thoughtfulness in her writing. She acted on her free will and never paid heed to what the society would think of all these. This is called separatist feminism.

The moment Helene knew of Frank's family situation in post-war England, her heart went out to them. She was not rich, but, her choosing to help her fellow people is an act of kindness which says a lot about the kind of person she is. Also, one can feel happy Frank accepted her favors. He set aside his male ego and prioritized his family's needs. Considering this happened in a patriarchal time, one should laud Frank for having thought practically and made the right decision. He had no qualms accepting Helene's favors. So, this paved way for Helene to do what she did her best without any hindrance. She was someone who believed in the joy of giving. And she gave so, as Frank never stopped her from doing it. Therefore, the cultural feminist in Helene was revealed by the author through her work.

Conclusion

Helene freed herself from the clutches of the community that was bent on stopping woman from taking lead. She chose to go against the conventions of patriarchy, for she believed that nothing good can come out of it. One has to laud her perspective as she defied the situation and brought joy to many English households. It was Helene's compassion and kindness that touched many lives. She never let herself be bound by anything that stopped her from following her heart. She can be called a cultural feminist as she was both gentle, yet, sure footed and acted out of free will, unmindful of the society that always tried to put her in place.

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