

Tracing "Her" Story in "His" Story: The Metamorphosis in the Portrayal of Women across Literature

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Abstract:

When language transcends the heights from being a mere tool of communication to a medium of literary expression, then it gets transformed into a fine art. Literature, over the years, has evolved in its depiction of women across ages but it has undoubtedly been plagued with prejudice and bias. The reason could be because in the ancient world, literacy was the domain of the male bastion and most of the published writers were men who treated women as angelic characters – innocent, physically weak and nothing more than household commodities.

From times immemorial it has become a medium of creativity, encompassing a galaxy of writers, poets, authors and dramatists who have immortalized their literary expressions in their magical play of words. Their works have inspired and regaled generations of human beings and will continue to do so in the contemporary and future times. In other words, their works have a timelessness, a perennial value in them. One only needs to pick and choose from these innumerable perspectives, the guidelines or paths one needs to emulate for one's personal progress and growth.

In the present paper I propose to study and analyze a few aspects from this sea of reflections and expressions. Firstly, the portrayal of women in the eyes of literarians and secondly how the Education Boards have picked and selected literary pieces pertaining to women issues and their corresponding impact, as it is most widely read and has a great outreach to the vulnerable section of society, namely the teenagers, who are in their formative age.

Keywords: women, gender, literature, representation, bias, discrimination, literature, mindset.

INTRODUCTION

Nature has undoubtedly ascribed different anatomy to man and woman but the discrimination between the genders is certainly not the work of nature but a creation of human mindset. A woman is the dawn of light that dispels darkness but sadly, the society has likened her to the moon-which shines but depends on man-her sun for light. Woman has been bestowed with the power to enlighten lives around her, create life too-after all, they are the ultimate creators of this very existence. Literature, which is the mirror of society carves a stereotype or a penumbra image of all that is worthy and also insignificant in life. As Ezra Pound said "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree...". The power to make or mar rests with the creators of the volumes that constitute literature. Portrayal of women in literature needs a whiff of fresh air where a new spark of resurgence is needed- the glass ceilings need to be shattered and the power and honour of women's portrayal in literature needs to be inspirational. I would like to quote what Anne Frank echoed in "The Dairy of a Young Girl", where she says, "Women should be respected as well! Generally speaking, men are held in great esteem in all parts of the world, so why shouldn't women have their share? Soldiers and war heroes are honoured and commemorated, martyrs are revered, but how many people look upon women too as soldiers? ... Women who struggle and suffer pain to ensure the continuation of human race, make much tougher and more courageous soldiers than all those big-mouthed freedoms fighting heroes put together."

The present paper is an enquiry into the under/misrepresentation of women across the text books in high school and undergraduate level which leaves a lasting impression on the formative minds to whom these texts are mirrored. The literature that these youngsters are exposed to is a part of socializing process along with our interactions with friends and family.

What is important is to assign strong roles and characters to women so that they act a foundation – a building block to generate respect and equality for women in society. It is important to have books and texts that do not portray women as “accessories” or “commodities” and have a role to play beyond obedient daughters, beautiful wives and dutiful mothers.

The Journey from Greek times to the “evolved” better half: -

A glimpse of the Greek mythology is enough to get an idea that women then were nothing more than “sexual objects”. They played almost no role in societal functioning. They had limited rights and almost no freedom of expression. In short, they were hardly represented as stakeholders of the society. Moving on to the medieval times, the canvas of literature and the portrayal of women was painted with the colour of Christianity. Even literature showcased women characters torn between the prototypical 'good virgin' and surprisingly candid sexual and domineering antagonist. The seeds of feminist writing were sown in the Medieval Times. By nineteenth century women started feeling the need to find their ‘space’ beyond the confines of the homes and craved to redefine their existence by challenging subjugation, suppression and restriction. Thus, literature began to evolve by being a mouth piece for liberty and feminism thereby triggering socio-economic and political impact.

Gassman (2006) made an interesting observation of the depiction of women in pre and post feminist era, highlighting the stronger projection of ‘self’ by women in their writing. Another remarkable work by Virginia Wolff (1972) in *'A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature'* showcases how the stereotypes remained so embedded in society that they persisted through the years, often becoming the images of reality that even women strive to achieve. The stereotype varied from 'the virtuous woman and the sensuous woman' to 'the sentimental stereotype' to 'the liberated woman'.

Stereotyping Women and the struggle for evolution: Reflections and Observations from Literature

A shift was seen in Edwardian poetry where he spoke of women’s rights gathering much attention and spoke of feminism and women getting out of their homes during war times .Anita Nair, rightly observes that Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. She goes further to list 'Good women', who accept societal norms and get rewarded and then paints feisty heroines like Eizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Eyre in the novel by the same name, who eventually go onto find solace and purpose in 'a good man’s arms', Henrik Ibsen walks a mile further by clearly indicating in *'A Doll’s House'* through the male protagonist Helmer who states that the right place for a women is in the confines of the four walls of the house to which the liberated Nora retorts that she is first and foremost a woman then, a wife and mother.

Perennial Portraits by Magicians of Words

Let us try to enlighten ourselves on the image of women created by writers. First of all, we must clearly understand the fact, that the attributes or the traits of virtue or villainy, stand apart from the gender of a human being. Hence, when a writer contrasts a virtuous woman to a vamp, then the comparison is between the inherent good or evil within a person or the bright and dark sides of a person's character. This becomes the basis of the creation of a role model. It is like a mirror which reflects the images of falsehood and truth.

The representation of gender, race and religion is plagued by bias in all forms - be it literature, cinema or television. These stereotypes are so ingrained in our upbringing that they become the epitome of our behaviour. As conscientious citizens the onus lies on us to evaluate the content that will eventually shape the youngster's idea of "self". The biased representation of gender in literature makes us question the ideological framework that determines the concept of "self". The depictions of the narratives of women influence the mindsets of both girls and boys. They imbibe these portrayals of sexes and they begin to related 'self' and others in the biased contextual framework.

Hues and colours of the Canvas: Women across genres; from Drama to Poetry to Fiction

The role model one needs to follow becomes a matter of personal preference. Let us pick some literary instances, which have made deep impressions and molded mindsets.

We begin with one of the greatest writers in English language, William Shakespeare. His play 'King Lear' portrays a brilliant attitudinal contrast between his youngest daughter Cordelia and her older sisters Goneril and Regan. Cordelia's integrity, selflessness, honesty and true affection for her father stands in stark comparison to the superficiality and ruthlessness shown by her two sisters. They run in extremes of positive and negative attributes. When Goneril throws out her aged father from the palace, in the middle of a stormy night, King Lear utters the words '*How sharper than the serpents tooth it is to have a thankless child*' (King Lear, Act 1 Scene 4) And, for Cordelia, who saves, cares and in the end sacrifices her life for his sake, he says '*When thou dost ask me blessing, I kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness*' (King Lear, Act 5 Scene 3)

The character of Portia in the '*The Merchant of Venice*' showcases intelligence, wit and presence of mind in the face of calamity. She disguises herself as a lawyer and fights for the honor and release of her chosen suitor Antonio and pulls him out from the clutches of death. In

the courtroom, she turns the tables against the Jew Shylock with her reason and rhetoric. Again, Portia's famous mercy speech creates an indelible impact as a humanitarian plea.

The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,

Upon the place beneath.

It is twice blessed.

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

It is mightiest in the mightiest,

Act 4 Scene 1 (The Merchant of Venice)

Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth' has been projected as a woman who has touched the heights of vice and manipulating skills in bending her husband's mind to fulfill her noxious plans. Her ambitions lead to all the bloodshed and ultimate downfall of her husband. Very expressively she regrets the ruin she causes in the words '*All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little land*' (Macbeth Act V)

For the queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, Shakespeare immortalizes her in the quote '*Now, boast the, death in thy possession lies a lass unparalleled*'. (Anthony and Cleopatra, ACT 5 Scene2)

Jane Austen has beautifully contrasted a panorama of women characters in all hues and colors, attitudes and contentions, in her classic '*Pride and Prejudice*'. The stereotypes are well defined and so is the astute, self-assured, independent streak of the heroine Elizabeth Bennet, which stands apart from the other female characters.

Charles Dickens' poignant portrayal of Nancy and Rose in '*Oliver Twist*' brings out the purity, goodness, honesty and compassion that a human being can be capable of. Rose wishes to genuinely help Nancy, who is in a low station of life, owing to her circumstances. Arrogance and false pride don't malign her thoughts, she says to Nancy (Oliver Twist chapter 40) when she meets her for the first time, the following words:

Their conversation touches the deep recesses of moral and social stands and issues of society in heart-wrenching words :(Oliver Twist, chapter40)

Fyodor Dostoevsky's '*Crime and Punishment*' takes the reader through a remarkable journey of the life of Sonya Marmeladov. She introduces Raskolnikov, the protagonist, to the

story of Lazarus, becomes his confidante and follows him to Siberia to become his soul mate forever.

Fairness in Selection of Texts by education Boards and Universities

Now, we come to the Education Board's efforts in the direction of portrayal of women. First of all, the poem by Kamala Das titled, 'My Mother at Sixty-Six'. The poetess clearly gives a message that all mortals decay physically with the passage of time, but a mother's love is forever etched in a child's memory and will live on like the essence of the rose, long after the petals have faded away. They may meet or they may not after the daughter bids farewell to her mother at the airport, but those sweet memories of childhood will sustain the child forever, they will never decay. It is a tribute to motherhood.

Next is John Keats 'A Thing of Beauty' originally from his classic poem *Endymion*. It is the quest of the shepherd Endymion which is actually the yearning human soul to reach out for the goddess Cynthia manifested in the immortal nature, through the moon. The poet has raised the pedestal of the women to that of a Goddess, for whose love, the man strives for a lifelong. This is the journey of self realization. Our Indian culture revolves around the power of 'Shakti' or 'Devi'. In every line Keats reflects that a thing of beauty is a joy forever.

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness;

In 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', the underlying message is that Aunt Jennifer, who is an abused woman, is actually the creator of the tigers; the men. The men are the creation and women are the creators who give birth to men; hence, it questions that how can the creation be greater than the Creator? Aunt Jennifer creates an alternate world of Tigers in her embroidery but still they are her creation. Hence, she rings a warning bell to all the adolescent women, not to subjugate and suppress themselves anymore like her. They must make an effort to break the age-old bonds of suppression and become independent individuals, if they don't wish to face the same fate as hers. Through education, careers and financial independence, they should break the chains and give expression their real selves. The text of the poem:

The tigers in the panel that she made

Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

The story back home: How Indian Literature draws the character of Women

Moving in to Indian Fiction, “Kamala Makandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* has the protagonist Rukmani who is confronted with struggle after struggle with no sign of improvement or freedom from anguish and affliction. The flagrant tyrannizing mindset of man supported by a patriarchal society is symbolic of the loss of value and respect for the “weaker sex”.

Anita Desai’s *Cry, The Peacock* depicts Mala as the rebellious protagonist who fights three traditional stereotypes in her life. Firstly, she is victimized by the male authority asserted by her husband. Secondly her female friends play the stereotypical complaint roles of wives and her religious beliefs in karma and detachment. Maya’s feminist perception makes her protest against a society that undervalues women. She constantly battles to authenticate her own values and worth.

In sharp contrast we have Manju Kapur’s fiction *Difficult Daughters* which is a reflection of the social hypocrisies existent in society. Her characters are emblematic of modern ethos bound in cultural clutches. Her heroines depict an assertive mood and a influencing desire to attain self assertion and self identity. *Difficult Daughters* brings forth the conflicts of three generations. Kasturi becomes a victim of patriarchy and reduces her existence to an object of mercy. Her daughter Veermati is a shade better because she initially sacrifices all her happiness for the sake of her parents and siblings, but later she breaks the glass ceiling, pursues her education, gains independence and charts her own course of life through a journey of self realization after a series of compromises, conflicts and adjustments. Ida, representing the third generation shows an uncompromising attitude of non adjustment in life and towards her career. Similarly, in the short story “Chocolate” the protagonist Tara overtly seeks revenge for long imposed infertility and cruelty by her husband and in-laws. She remains within the bounds of prescribed codes of a male dominated society in the early phase of her marriage but when things get too much for her to endure, she rebels against forced aspirations and refuses to be chained in patriarchy. She smartly traps her husband and takes revenge on him to regain her lost status in society. The evolution of the character Tara reveals Manju Kapur’s craftsmanship as a writer where she traces the growth of the protagonist from a meek existence to a self decisive woman by challenging the hollowness and artificiality prevalent in marriage as an institution. "Chocolate" is symbolic of her sensitive handling of significant issues concerning women and creating characters capable of setting aside traditional mindsets and impositions.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, literature is the only place that imparts women freedom to express the privacy of thoughts through the printed word. So it is important how we word one words.

Literature is submissive to truth. It is the expression of thoughts of our society. It is the background of the cause and effect of social progress. Literature in fact re-scripts and amends credibility in compatibility with the evolution of society. However, in spite of this, women have been denied of their fundamental rights for years. Gender distinctions have marred the lives of women. Ironically Jane Austen spent less than two years in a school for young women whereas her brothers went to Oxford. Elif Safak (2001) wonderfully sums up in "*Black Milk: Or Writing Motherhood and Harem Within*" that. Male writers are thought of as 'writers first' then 'men'; as for female writers they are first 'female' and only then 'writers'.

Education is the liberating and levelling factor that shapes an egalitarian society. As Malala Yosafzai stated how Extremists have shown what frightens them most: a girl with a book. So, it is extremely important to break the old stereotypes and open young minds to women as 'equals'. Special attention should be given to what young minds read and how women are portrayed in the literature prescribed for them.

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