

Portrayal of Women in Literature – Through the Ages

1Sima Singh
1Assistant Professor
1Saraswati College of Engineering

Abstract - History of Literature has noticed and observed the role of women being evolved through Centuries. The Journey of Women of Yesterday has been very crucial, scornful, censures which they have handled with poise and patience. Women have endured all the criticism and persisted with their perilous journey. Today Women have come a Long Way emerging as the Strong Fraternity. The following paper discusses the advancement of women from prehistoric period to last ultra-modern period. The paper discusses the women freedom, their problems and concerns described in the literature through the women centric roles. The representation of contemporary women by different female authors is also discussed. Women in the past were expected to be submissive, silent and they were always alleged of being garrulous. Women were forced to meet the expectations of men unwillingly long because of their subordinate status to men in male-dominated society. In Fact, this has to be noticed that in the past most of the published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was without doubt prejudiced. The following paper discusses that a accountable reason for this the fact that in the ancient world, literateness was severely restricted, and the maximum of those who could pen were male and they did not perceive women with an approach of grace and gratitude but a mere tool for household activities.

keywords - women Characterization, type-cast society, liberation.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is wisely said that literature is the mirror image of the culture. We learn and adapt from the past and introduce it in our present as our “Culture”. The ancient Scriptures or the Vedas knowledgeably describe women, who both complemented and supplemented their male partners. When it comes to talking about significant female figures of the Vedic period, four names - Ghosha, Lopamudra, Sulabha Maitreyi, and Gargi –generally come to our mind. This inspires and influences the poets, their lyrics and poetry which also help in shaping the women characters. However, the thought process differed from one creation to another and so did the characterization of women. Some depicted Women as Symbol of strength & Unity and some used them as an object of pleasure. The characters were curated and modified to suit the prerequisites of a patriarchal society. The example of these is the epic Ramayana and Mahabharata - women characters and the contrasting characteristics of Sita being submissive, sacrificing yet unacceptable in the society who had to go through all the agonies for no fault of hers, whereas Draupadi has been known for her sharp eloquence and interpretations and has been represented as the central power and the reason or the cause of the Mahabharata.

Typecast imaginings of women is continuing since ages, we however cannot change the mind-set of anyone who believes of these out-dated virtues of women. Tanner (1986) admits “the images or stereotype has some truth—as stereotypes often do” (Tanner, 1986:1). That is to say, these stereotyped views do prove something true of women. However, in utmost substances, these old opinions twist or cover the truth. For example, women are blamed for talking too much. The truth is there were certain

Expectations of women in traditional society and one of the English Proverbs says “silence is the best ornament of a woman” (Coates, 2004:25). Thus women were expected to be silent in the past (Coates, 2004). Women were seen as an ornamental piece only and were forced to meet all the expectations of the male-dominated society. In this regard, eighteenth-century Britain can be taken as a worthy illustration to present different in the centric roles of men and women played during that era. Olsen (1999) stressed that it was the duty of the “Man” of the house to support the whole family by earning money while the women were left to do the household chores and raise the child at home.

II. FEMALE CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE

Character is an attribute that serves as an interpretation, identification and representation that shows the style, role and rank of every individual in the society. Until comparatively recently, the majority of published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was inevitably one-sided. However, the contribution of women to oral culture should not be underestimated – in folk songs, stories and nursery rhymes – a tradition which eventually fed into written culture.

Throughout the history of Literature, women have been depicted in many different ways. The characterization of women in Literature is often influenced by an author's personal experience or a frequent societal stereotype of women and their position. Often, male authors interpret society's views of women in a completely different nature than a female author would. While F. Scott Fitzgerald may represent his main female character as a victim in the 1920's, Zora Neale Hurston portrays hers as a strong, free-spirited, and independent woman only a decade later in the 1930's.

Although women feature strongly in Chaucer's earlier works, such as “*The Boke of the Duchess*” and “*Troilus and Criseyde*”, we only find three women on the pilgrimage described in “*The Canterbury Tales*”:

- The Wife of Bath
- The Prioress
- ‘Another nun’ who accompanies her but is hardly mentioned again.

Women have been interpreted as wicked, heartless, prostitute, mother, wife, sister, deceit, partner, and confidants. Sobande (1959) rightly observed in Rigimo Obirin Ko Se etu that women are good and as well, bad. They are viewed as unavoidable companion for men, without them, life is not pleasing. Thus, he validated his view with the Yoruba philosophical belief about them particularly, on women conduct.

The Masculine gender specified that female possessed only passive qualities in comparison to male and these were feminine qualities. However, in some circumstances it was not the same as there werewomen who possessed more masculine qualities than even their partners. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennett can never match the resourcefulness of his wife in her attempts to settle their five daughters in life; Edgar Linton in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* is a caricature of manliness; in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, an only daughter, Molly Gibson, proves to be a better child to her father than a son, Osborne Hamley, who fails his parents; George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* presents Maggie Tulliver as a far stronger, braver and tougher character than her brother Tom. Britomart, Spenser's heroine, though innocent and gorgeous, was masculine as represented by her cross-dressing as a Knight and her magic spear in her adventure, a strong character who very actively fought as a knight and saved lives.

In general, female characters’ images are portrayed positively in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. In addition, as these terms are either from female characters’ conversations in the novel or from the author’s description. Since the author Jane Austen is also a female, we can conclude that females prefer to use more positive terms and neutral terms instead of negative terms. This kind of language inclination can be traced to the politeness theory which is mentioned by Coates (1993). Women use more positive terms in order to save addressees’ faces and show their harmonisation. Though women have lower social status than men in eighteenth century, it does not mean they obtain powerless language as well. The politeness of women’s language indicates women’s good behaviour which is broadly expected by society and actually women are brought up to talk in this way (Trudgill, 2000). Further, Coates (2003) states that middle-class women are the most delicate ones to prestige forms and our author happens to be the case. Jane Austen belongs to middle-class and she tries her best to apply standard forms to prove her social status and gain respect from society. It explains why the majority of terms in the table are standard forms.

Speaking of depiction of women in Indian poetry, Mahadevi Varma, a freedom-fighter, and activist became the reflection of Hindi poetry on womanhood issues. She also wrote on issues of women's freedom. She drew encouragement for her subjects from traditional Hindu literature, which talked about freedom.

Kamala Das paved way for a pitiful style of women confessional poetry, in which a common theme was the exploration of the man-woman relationship. This style was subsequently taken up by other women poets such as Gauri Deshpande and Chitra Narendran.

III. PROTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS BY MODERN WOMEN WRITERS

The Probationer, by AM Irvine is the best example of state of women in the post-Victorian era. Indicating the beginnings of Modernism, the novel also showcases individualities of the modern women’s rights by describing an independent and gifted female protagonist’s professional and personal coming-of-age.

Amongst the modern Indian writers Shobha De is one of the most radical writers who can voice her opinions in a strong contemporary and ultra-modern way through her novels. Women in her writings are portrayed in a quite exceptional and nonconformist way. Her novels are a blend of Romance, love, lust, hatred and extra marital relationship, but in an extravagant way. In fact she tries to portray the reality of urban and cosmopolitan society. Her women characters are ultra-modern and westernized who have no faith or belief in philosophy or mythology. Shobha De’s women break all sorts of prohibitions and feel unconventional. Her novels highlight the vital reality and create awareness of women miseries and injustices subjected to them by their equivalents in the male-controlled society. Recently, contemporary popular fiction Indian writer, Chetan Bhagat has showcased the new woman in his books. Chetan portrays his women characters as forerunners of social change and equality, an aspect which is evident in his book ‘One Night @ the Call Centre’, where men and women are treated equally and work in night shifts.

IV. CONCLUSION

History of Literature has experienced the characters of women developing through ages. The portrayal of women was without doubt prejudiced as the society was ruled by the Men and most of the published writers were men until modern times. Therefore, the journey of women being neglected and dominated has been occurring historically throughout in Literature. Be it her Existence, Character, role, Significance or Women herself. The irrelevance and subjugation of women prior to the mid-19th century is related by the small roles of females in literature. As women grew equality, the protagonist continued to change. By studying these changes, it is detected that not only do the characters personify the female identity, but also the protagonists transform into the new figures that women aim to be.

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