

# Representation of Women in Literature through Different Era

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## Abstract

The present research has reflected over the state of woman in the English literature for evaluation. In the due course to the research analysis of the impact of literature over contemporary society has been done. The problem statement has evaluated that gap in representation of woman in the contemporary literature. In alignment to the problem statement and the findings as per literature review objectives have been set. The objective of the research is to trace the evolutionary pathway followed by feminist entities in the literature. Exploratory research approach and qualitative collection of data have supported thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has been found supportive of effective analysis of the growth and development shared by women in literature. Thematic analysis have suggested that the medieval literatures were limited to commoditization of the woman along with promoting different roles of woman of which mother hood is prominent. The later era have focused over praising the beauty of woman and was considerably liberal. Also cross dressing was evident. Women have faced satire based on ineffective correspondence with social norms in the Victorian era and in modern age the writings are focused over reliance over feminism for fighting social evils.

## Keywords

English literature, Feminism, Victorian era, Woman.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background and rationale

Literature is a reflection to contemporary society and progression of feminism can be effectively stressed by studying literature belonging from different eras. The present study tends to analyse representation of women in order to derive sufficient insights about contemporary society and future developments. Gender identity is an issue which is in much focus in today's world. Successful implementation of women empowerment projects shares a scope of motivation. The woman's past has been suppressed as per available research. However a number of literatures have upheld women in the role of protagonists and have boosted the independent morale of the feminist side of the society. Resurfacing of such literature is expected to act as a motivator to the contemporary women empowerment campaigns and thus stands supportive of anti-gender bias sentiments. Literature has considerable effect over contemporary society and thus can act as a trigger to solve social problems. The Nobel Prize in literature is supportive of rewarding contemporary writers with phenomenal writing capabilities. It has been observed that the number of women writers is considerably lower in case of literature Nobel Prize winners. The statistics from 1901 to 2020 suggests 16 female awardees against 101 male awardees [1]. Significantly other studies have suggested that women tend to promote a lesser number of female protagonists with increasing age. Thus lack of woman representation both in literature and within the character is evident.

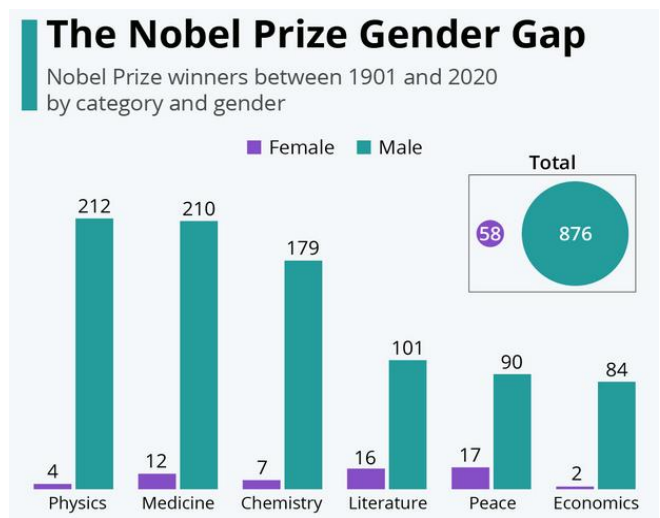


Figure 1: Nobel Prize gender gap

### Significance

The research is directed towards detailed analysis of representation of women in literature throughout ages. Based on such studies, dynamic cultural; viewpoint towards can be well evaluated. The study is helpful in identification of cultures that are most rigid towards gender equality. Literature is helpful in understanding psychological pitfalls carried by misogynist dominated society and thus better application of plans and policies related to women empowerment is possible. A nature in common that is evident in modern literature is boldness shared by woman characters that were missing in the mediaeval era literature. Such literature presents an efficient scope to highlight the context of changing nature of the bowman society and related socio-cultural dynamics.

## Literature review

In the complementary literature upheld by children, films produced by Disney have significance in shaping the psyche of girls in their teenage years towards the concept of romanticism. It has been observed that finding love or a suitable partner is the key goal of princesses that has been represented in the movies [2]. Such manifestations are drivers of imaginative blend of thoughts and are capable of marching a large number of female audiences under the banner of romanticism. Chances of adaptation of narrowed representation of female responsibilities can lead to distorting outlook towards life. The literature guiding such plots is away from reality and thus is baseless from a pragmatic perspective. The factor of directive speech can be segregated into different categories that tends to follow ask, order, request, command begging permitting and so on. In case of the character promoted by Jane Austen asking, advising and requesting are important direct speech characteristics observed [3]. Such characteristics are signifying classical etiquettes carried by contemporary female audiences belonging from the British countryside. However such novels broadly follow the perspective of finding a romantic partner as the sole motto of female responsibility. Environment also has been shown as a contributing factor towards such representation. The renaissance period in English literature is much honoured for upholding a literary piece that produced a fresh lease of life to the English literature post dark era in the mediaeval period. The literatures appearing in the renaissance period demanded for literatures that are separate in gender identity. The concept of contemporary patriarchal dominance towards growing woman literatures and literacy has been well conceived in *Writing Beloveds* that stands as testimony to woman repression in the fifteenth and sixteenth century [4]. Passive qualities of females have been highlighted in the past literature that can be well linked to lack of gender consciousness and lack of freedom in the society. Sexual and amorous representation of women is another example of portrayal of the gender from a misogynist perspective. Gender representation has covered the theme of complexions in the sonnets of Shakespeare's that were written to dark ladies. However the representation was ethereal and cosmetic corresponding to the real life state of the woman.

## OBJECTIVES

The study has set out to identify the available literature from the perspective of modern society and the study is not mechanically limited within the academic ambit of academic study. The objectives thus can be defined as

- To analyse the growth and evolution of feminine characteristics over the different era in literature
- To identify the barriers and challenges faced by women in contemporary ages
- To related the developments with present age female representation oriented developments

- To identify prejudices that have remained unchanged in the present age

## METHODOLOGY

In academic research methodology is the Key to deriving effective inferences to the mentioned problems as the same is responsible for effective alignment of the research findings with the needs of research objectives. Prior to data collection setting a clear research philosophy is needed for providing a guiding structure to the course of the research [5]. It is necessary to mention that research philosophies differ as pragmatism, interpretivism, realism and positivism. Effective study of contemporary society and themes related to society can be well evaluated by the use of interpretivism research philosophy. The mention of research design is also necessary alongside the philosophy. It can be stated that for mainstream research the research design differs as exploratory and conclusive. Exploratory research is helpful in deriving patterns of qualitative information that has evolved over the years [6]. As the present research is based on representation of women in different ages a trend analysis is possible based on qualitative research. As qualitative research is well supported by the exploratory research approach the same is effective in analysis if such literary perspectives. Quantitative or empirical research is supported by conclusive research design. However the same is not capable of handling multiple perspectives in deriving conclusions thus is not significant for the present study. Qualitative research conducted by means of Secondary collection data is well reliable due to peer review [7]. In the present research in order to cover the wide range of woman representation centric data over the past era in literature secondary data collection has been done. The selection has been based on inclusion and exclusion criteria that are in sync with purposive sampling. For inclusion data has been collected from dependable data sources, also a high number of peer reviewed data has been collected. In the due process no unethical means has been applied and journals that have been published post 2018 January have been used. For exclusion journals that are poorly referred to have been ignored. Also Journals without number and volume have been excluded. The collected data has been calculated by means of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis helps in segregation of data in different segments and based on the same effective observation of patterns can be used for qualitative research [8]. The present research demands effective evaluation of women in different roles in order to arrive at an integrated conclusion. Based on the same thematic analysis of qualitative data has been prioritised. The research duration is dependent upon availability of relevant data along with meeting different research perspectives. Based on the length of the research 3 months can be considered to bear an adequate time frame for completion.

## RESULTS

### Theme 1: Women in literature of English middle age

In the mediaeval period of English literature that lasts from 12th to 15th century, different identities of women can be observed but most of those identities show them as second class citizens of society and women commodification can be found as the central idea of the mediaeval English literature. Chaucer, Malory and William Langland are some of the major writers of the mediaeval age [13]. Suppression over weak women can be found in most of the literature written during this period. Most common and positively used women characteristics in the mediaeval age literature can be considered as the idea of "The virgin". In most of the literature women are presented as the idea of purity. Women are mentioned to remain pure until their wedding and unmarried women of mediaeval age were represented as virtuous and pure women. This concept mostly evolved from the concept of Mother Mary who is also called Virgin Mary. In mediaeval English literature virgin ladies are often found in guiding the hero character to the path of God and they are mostly presented as graceful and beautiful. Una of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is one of the examples of the virgin identity of mediaeval aged ladies who are represented as pure souls who are protected by the Red Cross Knight and she helped the hero in staying on the path.

Women are also represented as the idea of Mother which was the main role of women described in mediaeval age literature. The mother image was also developed from the concept of Mother Mary. The Second's Shepherd's Play is an example where women are represented aligned with the image of Mother Mary not Virgin Mary. *Beowulf* is another example where Grendel's mother shows protectiveness which is another identity of the mother identity shown in mediaeval literature.

Witches are another identity that can be observed in a large amount of literature of this age. Witches of middle aged literature are found in possessing power and knowledge. There are two types of witches found in middle age literature. Witchcraft was a major part of the society during middle age. White witches are wise old women who are often found using herbs to cure people and black witches possess black magic power which is used in harming people. Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kremer's *Malleus Maleficarum* addresses witches as satanic and sexual abominations. Bible and various epic tales are found in using witch characters in the main storyline. Societal fear regarding women with power and intelligence is the backbone of the idea of witch and representing them as out of society.

In mediaeval age women were widely considered as lower than men and they were not allowed to take parts in such works which are generally performed by men. Women were not provided with the same rights as the men and mediaeval prostitutes are the idea generated from this societal structure. *The Wife of Bath's* tale is a sub-story of *The Canterbury tales* written by Chaucer which provides multiple references regarding the purpose and place of women in the society. Old

woman in this story resembles the idea of a mediaeval prostitute. The ideas generated ages behind are presented in this story in an effective manner as in this story the old woman only thinks about money and land provided by her customers. In this story the old woman can be found fighting against the laws and rules of the society as her job was considered a sin in this society.

Mediaeval comic literature is found in using tricksters and pranksters in an extensive manner. The trickster archetype of women in literature was developed from the character of Eve in the Old Testament. In most of the mediaeval writings it can be found that women are subservient to men and their voices are often found in being suppressed by society. Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's* tale addresses a different idea to this archetype as the old woman of this story is found in outsmarting men and reputed people of the society. Tricksters of mediaeval literature are often found in being cunning and foolish both who are responsible in raising awareness among main characters of the stories as well as readers.

### Theme 2: Analysis of the State of woman in the Elizabethan period

Role of feminist entities surfaced evidently in the Elizabethan age due to portrayal of women in the dramas that were performed on stage. Stage performance is a different form of literature from that of literal piece of works. Dramas were an essential part of the literature in the Elizabethan age and thus representation of women is expected to have a large impact over the general people. Stark similarity can be witnessed in literatures that belong from the Renaissance period and the protest state of patriarchy in the society. Lack of promotion of women to the role of responsibility and power has been a principle which has stayed unchanged even in the present society. The degree of freedom enjoyed by present day women has definitely enhanced considerably. Contemporary literature that revolves around the theme of marriage and love tends to portray male dominance as women were not free to choose their spouse [9]. In the Elizabethan period it has been observed that the Lack of women in the dramas was mitigated by employing male actors playing roles of women. Such portrayals were part of convention and for the sake of art shared collective acceptance. Thus, fluid nature and lesser rigidity in representation of women in the public domain can be well inferred. Such representation is contrary to the mediaeval period where women representation in the literature was highly commoditized.

The age was marked with the rise of creative writing and rise of knowledge in the form of the Renaissance movement. Thus experimentation with cross-dressing is conceivable. However a number of principles related to social display of gender were guided by the church and were Biblical. As traditional fluidity in the Bible was restricted based on religious belief, instances of clash of literature with religion is evident in representation of the feminist elements. Such thoughts have been found to have wide impact over the aspects of modern drama and modern representation of

gender on stage. In 1899 Sarah Bernhardt played the male protagonist Hamlet. The present representation of women in the Shakespearean dramas is different from real life portrayal as a number of cinematic liberties have shaped the representations. The elements of exaggerated representation of the beauty of women in the contemporary sonnets have been well contradicted by Shakespeare in the 'sonnet 130' [10].

### **Theme 3: Women representation in English literature of Victorian period**

The Victorian age of English literature refers to the literature written during the period of reign of Queen Victoria which lasted for almost 70 years from 1837 to 1901. Some of the major writers of the Victorian age are Rudyard Kipling, William Thackeray, Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens and George Elliot. Role of religion in society, scientific, technological and economic factors affecting English society are major traits of Victorian aged English literature. Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning are major poets of the Victorian age and George Barnard Shaw and Oscar Wilde are major playwrights of this age. The Victorian age can be considered the golden age of English Novels. The Victorian age is known for endurances and sufferings of women [11]. A huge number of novels and other forms of literature can be found in addressing the sufferings of traditional and typical Victorian aged female characters. Based on societal values in most of the literature women characters are often found in being suppressed by society and men where they were mostly considered as property of men. Most of the writers have found in portraying British women as accepting and naive figures trying to live up to the respectable women of the society. Two of the phrases of feminine movement in literature were involved in this stage.

Charles Dickens novels are found in having women characters belonging to different social classes and show his observations and viewpoints over women of that time. Dickens has presented women of his literature in different roles as destructive, angelic, abused, evil women and true mother but can be found in preferring to show women as angelic identities representing happiness. Amy Dorrit of the novel Little Dorrit is this kind of angelic character who provides new hope and optimism in life.

Thomas Hardy presented women as having more instinct and impulse than men and his theme of representing women in his creations is based on a realism approach. Susan of the novel The Mayor of Casterbridge is an example of this idea. It can be stated that female characters developed by Hardy are made up of simple elements and experiences while having greater variety than other writers of his time.

Bronte's viewpoints over women are based on what should be done by them in order to achieve psychological and financial independence which were not actually present in their lives. They were very rarely supported by husbands in these aspects if they are lucky enough.

### **Theme 4: Representation of woman in the modern literature**

Role of women empowerment has evolved as a responsibility of literary articles in the postmodern period. The change has been supported by movements supportive of equality of rights and equality of ownership. Postmodern literature that is female centric is obvious to shed heavy focus over the concept of feminism. The same is directed towards bringing about socio-economic change by means of political instruments. Image and power has been highlighted by Annette Khunj in the literary work *the power of image*. Autonomy is female oriented literature and has been a keen focus of most of the female writers in the present society. However mixed results of such literature have been evaluated. The surfacing works of literature that point towards the concept of violence over females have stayed unchanged in comparison to the previous works. With regard to the same mention must be made of the work named *World's Wife* that represents marital rape and domestic violence as localized structure of feminist exploitation [12]. Such study is in relevance to the derogatory representation of women that was evident in the middle ages. A number of representations of women centric problems are bold and represent the present surroundings as hindrance to social growth as equal gender representation is yet limited.

### **DISCUSSION**

Based on the above sturdy it has been observed that the journey of women in the literature has been marked by success and repression. Contemporary society in the middle age has been found to n be highly pessimistic towards the woman centric demand and thus domination is evident. However, the concept of gender representation can be witnessed to be less rigid in the Elizabethan period, which has made representation of woman character over the stage. The concept of experimentation with cross dressing has come up as an evident feature of the stage in representation of drama. However elements of rigidity have led to stereotyping of such appearances. Most of the repression that was stereotypical in nature has resulted out of the Biblical influence in the renaissance period [13]. Freedom in woman centric representation has increased considerably in the postmodern period. Increase in Autonomy of women centric literature has evolved the awareness related to equality and thus feminism has taken root. However it has been observed that domestic and sexual violence against woman as an r3representaion in literature is evident. The representation of women in the middle age was commoditised highly across all domains of feminine role. The literature has evaluated elements that can be categorised as having negative connotations towards the growth and development of individual women.

Virginity of women has been a theme of grave importance and a number of literary pieces have been formulated centring women as the flag bearers of purity. Such purity is linked to virginity and not purity of soul. Such themes have been handled in the bible as well. Biblical characters in the



mediaeval age are centred towards the aspects of motherhood and virginity. Two most glaring examples of the same can be well conceived in representation of the characters Virgin Mary and Mother Mary. The literature has elevated the nature of motherhood to a higher degree of universal acceptance. Evil spirited beings have been projected as having caring mothers. Thus, the derogatory and suppressive nature of the society at mediaeval age in spite of oppression towards women shared high respect towards motherhood. The nature of suffering that were faced by women have changed considerably in the Victorian era, as the sufferings can be stated to be centred on social milieus. The representation of women through the lens of male dominance is significant as the naive and fragile nature of women represented in Victorian age poetry has been a resultant of writing male writers. The irony of the era lies in the fact that the state of women in literature was derogatory even after the sovereign power was in the responsible hands of queen Victoria. Multiple role based portrayals of women have taken place in the Victorian era such as angelic, evil, woman and mother. Few have represented women with higher impulse than men in Victorian writings.

### CONCLUSION

The study can be well concluded stating that representation of woman throughout different era of development of the literature has been different unique. The differences are evident in the portrayal of woman in different socio-cultural role in the English literature. The evaluation in lucid term suggests that woman have developed from a state of commodity to revolutionary citizens over the different eras. In each era such development has been feed by external forces. Most derogatory attitude towards development of feminine nature of woman has been faced in the middle ages. Elizabethan period is marked by a shift in focus towards beauty and praising of woman. Romanticism and alignment of female characters with male counterpart has been a theme in existence even in present literatures. However feminism and anti-stereotypical thoughts have faced effective challenges in the modern literature. Literatures can be stated to have supported development of liberal outlook of woman towards the society. Modern literatures are supportive of feminism oriented growth and development of supportive literary sources.

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