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Changing Role of Women in Literature

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Abstract

In the present paper, an attempt has been made to analyse and explore how the role of women has evolved through ages. This paper also throws light on the growth of status of woman from ancient time to the contemporary period. How the role of women underwent changes with the passage of time is the sum And substance of the present paper. This paper portrays beautifully feministic aspects, the problems and hardships associated with women and their quest for identity in a patriarchal society.Right from the beginning of Greek period in literature till date, there has been a tremendous change in the position of women who had played her role as mother, sister and wife.

Key-words: Feminism, Literature, Patriarchy, Gender, Equality

Paper

It is an established fact literature is the mirror of society. Without any shadow of doubt, it exposes the ideas and attitudes of the

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society. Through characters, it delineates human life, and by their words and deeds convey message for the purpose of instruction, information and delight. The changing role of women as witnessed through literature from past to present is an indication of growth of women and women empowerment.

Gender issues have been a topic in written literature since ancient times, when Greek poets such as Sappho and Homer wrote of female sexuality, marriage, and emotional bonds between women and their families, and philosophers questioned, and usually denigrated, the role of women in society.

If we go through the ancient scriptures, we find that women were considered equal to men in the society. In Indian vedas and upnishads, we find details pertainig to women sages and seers like Gargi and Matreyi. In addition to it, classical Sanskrit literature which serves as a source of inspiration for writing to later poets, begins with epics and puranas. There is no doubt in denying the fact that it also played an important role in influencing and shaping the women characters.

In the epics like *Ramayana,* and *Mahabharta,* women have been subjugated because of their gender. They were considered inferior

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to man and are still treated as objects for the pleasure of men in the present scenario. The reality is that that these characters were curated and edited to suit the needs of a patriarchal society. In the character of Sita, we have a woman of sacrificing nature, while in the character of Draupadi, we find a woman who was popular for her sharp oratory and comments and has been branded as being the centrifugal force that caused the war of Mahabharata.

On the other hand, Women in Greek mythology show that women's rights were very limited and not allowed to express much of their freedom. In ancient Greek life, role of women was considered to be totally insignificant as compared to that of Greek men. Most of the popular plays in Greek have female characters complex, taking upon the role of not only heroine, but also the role of villain and role of victim.

Women in Greek mythology were seen to be mere as sexual objects than individuals. Many were taken advantage of by the Gods and by human beings. One would see that women's rights were very confined limited and they were not allowed to express much of their freedom. Within this time period, women were

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blamed for wars, destruction of towns, and the death of men. It was not unlike to see goddesses using their powers for vengeance. Although the role of human women was limited the existence of goddesses attributed great amounts of power to female characters.

On the other extreme, Medieval literature show that the role of women was reduced to the narrow roles of wives, mothers. It is apparent from medieval literature restrictions placed on women underwent significant changes. With the passage of time, women gradually began to express more of her opinions and had equal role in society.

The women of the Medieval times were surprisingly a lot more candid and sexual than one might expect of an era where the ideal of femininity was Mary, the mother of Jesus. In actuality, the women in the literature of the period, as well as the historical female figures, seemed to be torn between the ideal and the physical desires and domineering character that her antagonist, Eve, embodies. In a careful reading of the literature of the time, one finds the first buds of a feminist literature emerging from the words on the pages.

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In the earlier works of Chaucer, one can come across the strong image of women as can be perceived in his work *The Boke of the Duchess* and *Troilus and Criseyde* where we meet only three women on the pilgrimage in *Prologue to Canterbury Tales* namely the wife of Bath, the prioress and 'another nun' who accompanies her but is hardly mentioned again. The two principal fields that were primarily meant for women were church and trade where they could achieve independence as the wife of bath has those skills such as weaving that gave her financial independence, though Chaucer's women can be seen grown wealthy by marrying a series of rich old men. It is tempting to see the Wife as a champion of female rights, and her *Tale* brings out the idea that women should have *maistrie* over men, but the Wife is of course a character in a story written by a man.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath may be a stereotype – the harridan or 'shrew' is found in other medieval writings, such as Naoh's wife, in some of the mystery plays. By the sixteenth century, there were other stereotypes, fostered by the courtly love tradition and by the emergence of the sonnet and Arcadian idylls. The idealised ladies of most sonnets or the shepherdesses of the pastoral verses bear little resemblance to real women. By the

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time of Shakespeare one can detect a note of cynicism – in Sonnet 130 he writes 'my mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun...' and proceeds to turn the conventional image of the mistress on its head. This woman's breath 'reeks'.

After entering the Elizabethan period, we are introduced to to themes like misogyny and superiority of men which is a typical aspect of this period. Women were considered as the thing of procreation during this age. It was a period when the women were found torn between the ideal of the virgin Mary, and her fallible counterpart, Eve. Consequently, it led to general distrust of women which further termed women as 'other' and it was alarming situation as far as women are concerned. Through various writings of the age, it can be observed that equality between men and women was no longer perceived.

With the starting of drama in the late sixteenth century, there was much more scope for the females to play roles on stage and this reached to its culminating point with the plays of William Shakespeare and John Webster. Women were acted by young men, which meant there were fewer parts written for them and they often had less to say – in the earlier plays, anyway. Romeo

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speaks much more than Juliet. There is also an unusually high proportion of single fathers in the plays.

In Shakespeare's later plays, we find heroines plenty to say for themselves. Interestingly, some of them are most articulate when disguised as men, e.g. Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. The disguised identity of females explores the fact that they found more freedom while playing masculine roles and could expose their competence and ability in a better way while playing roles as women.

'Infinite variety' seems to sum up the various female roles – it is hard to make generalisations about Beatrice, Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra and Desdemona. Most are seen as wives or daughters, but nieces are often more articulate, and there is at least one dominant mother: Volumnia in *Coriolanus*.

Webster's women characters, on the other hand, notably the Duchess of Malfi and Vittoria Corombona, are amongst the first to be overtly sexual, rather than just the objects of another's desire.

Although in the seventeenth century, with some common stereotypes, we come across a wide range of female representation during this period as the poetry of John Donne,

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Robert Herrick, and Andrew Marvell, but mistresses still appear to be coy. Much has been written about Milton's depiction of Eve, in *Paradise Lost*. Superficially, he could often sound misogynistic, but an incisive and in depth study reveals much more complexity in his treatment of the first woman. In his time, Milton was actually accused of being too progressive, thanks to pamphlets he wrote on divorce, and it is important to separate Milton, the child of his time, from the thinker who pushed boundaries philosophically and imaginatively.

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is also part of the established literary canon, and has had immense influence; it is easily overlooked that *Part Two* of the book is about Christiana, the wife of the original pilgrim. She has her own moral strength, even though she has male protection for much of her pilgrimage. In the literature written during this age, the females writers were largely overlooked, but two female authors at least from this period are now taken seriously: Emilia Lanier, Aphra Behn.

It was after only 1660 that the female actors were allowed on stage in England, and sexual intrigue became the main ingredients of the theatre. Amongst the stereotypes of Restoration

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comedy can be included sexually voracious young widows and older women. The witty, intelligent heroines of the 18th century comedies of manners follow a tradition extending from Wycherley and Congreve through to Goldsmith and Sheridan. This tradition also drew on the stereotypes of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, such as the witty servant girl, the bawdy wench, the dutiful daughter, the disobedient daughter and the unattainable angel – stereotypes which have survived to this day in some Hollywood presentations.

It is an established fact that after the rise of novel in the eighteenth century, there was also rise in the female writers. No doubt, in the prose of this century, there was detailed discussion of female characters in the works of this century.

In the beginning of the century, there was portrayal of the women governed entirely by male characters as in Richardson's *Pamela* as well as in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* where we find fanny Hill. These women were the typical representatives of virtues and vices presented in their characters. After a long gallery of male writers like Where Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, women novelists soon followed like Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe and

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supremely Jane Austen who depicted life and society from a woman's perspective.

Moving towards the Victorian Age, we witness deplorable condition of women who were confined to the four walls of their houses. Not only the education at college or university level, but at school level was also a day-dream for the females. Women in Charles Dickens have been seen as stereotypes: the harridans, the silly little wives, the *femme fatales*, but generalisations are dangerous. In his late novel *Our Mutual Friend*, Lizzie Hexham is a rounded, psychologically believable character. Women come into their own supremely in the novels of the Bronte sisters. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte depicts a woman who takes control of her own destiny – in a way that none of Jane Austen's heroines do, with the possible exception of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Two of Mrs Gaskell's novels, *Ruth,* and *Mary Barton*, focus on the economic realities of women within society. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is noted for the strength of its female roles. George Eliot believed that duty supplied personal purpose and meaning, which is reflected in many of the female characters in her novels, who are notable for their psychological complexity.

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As far as the image of the modern woman is concerned, various modern novelists like D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster have dealt with the female issues with a considerable degree of psychological analysis. Over the last one century and a half, novelists, whether male or female, have explored the psychology and social roles of women with increasing depth. Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf have made significant contributions to the perception of women in the literary canon, particularly in challenging traditional perceptions about the 'purity' of women. Women writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing, stand with male writers of the twentieth century as significant literary figures. The influence of other European writers during the nineteenth century and subsequently has been significant. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary,* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* contain almost archetypal characters, and dramatists such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and Brecht have presented memorable female characters. More recently, the feminist movement has produced a more conscious depiction of the roles of women. Angela Carter's reworking of traditional fairy tales and Margaret Attwood's *Handmaid's Tale* are key texts in this respect.

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Women's roles in literature has evolved throughout history and had lead women to develop into strong independent roles. Modern literature has served as an outlet and sounding board for women's rights and feminist pioneers. Female writers have come to the fore front and provided today's readers with a vast array of ethnic and cultural perspectives. The unique voice of female minorities is a common theme in many coming of age novels that allows each writer to establish a separate identity for their characters and themselves. Women in modern literature often include strong independent females juxtaposed by oppressed women to provide examples for young female readers and to critique short comings of our society. The emergence of the independent female novelist in America has allowed for a new evolution of the role of women in fictional literature.

It is difficult to summarize the role of women in Hispanic literature, as it has been ever changing. At times she may be submissive, at others, the fiercest of beasts, and most surprisingly sometimes seemingly weak but in actuality the most contriving of creatures. It is surprise to see a feminist view point since the Medieval times in Spanish and Latin American

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literature, but it's most productive era has come to exist in the last twenty years.

In this way, the position of women has changed if we compare the medieval period to modern age where women are playing equally dominant role in social, political and other spheres of life. At this point, they are almost at par with men and are working neck to neck with enthusiasm, energy and vitality. Nowadays we find a vast majority of female writers including poets, novelists and dramatists in the arena of literary activities. That means, no field of literature is untouched as far as the women writers are concerned.

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages, most of the published writers were men until recent times, therefore the portrayal of women was without doubt biased. Since the time of the first explorers to the present, women‟s roles and portrayal in literature reflect the changes occurring historically for women. The insignificance and oppression of women prior to the mid-19th century is related by the small roles of females in literature. As women gained equality, the heroine continued to change. By studying these changes, it is observed that not only do the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroines transform into the new figures that women aspire to be.

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