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Representation of Woman in Literature; Altered Over a Course of Time

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Abstract: Society has never been static; it is always in state of flux by considering new ideas, renouncing the old ones and by adhering to few with traditional and cultural importance. There are many factors which influence these changes in society such as political, scientific and religious. These new ideas are perpetuated through various means such as newspapers, televisions, radios and many digital forms of communication. So, all these things play a vital part in bringing about social changes. However, literature has been acting as a considerable force since time immemorial by illuminating the paths of many revolutions which proved boon to human civilization. Literature and society are in correspondence with each other and literature has been rightly called the mirror of society. Representative literary works of a time period are those which best exhibits the issues and predicaments of that society. It is the vociferous voices of literary men of repute which toppled many tyrannical regimes and swayed the people to leap vigorously into French Revolution, American Revolution, Indian war of independence and many other historical contestations for social metamorphosis were fuelled by the literary productions of that time. Good literature always espouses the worthy social causes and lash out the evil things to the hem of extinction. This paper tries to elucidate the contribution of literature in representing and ameliorating the social status of women folk in society. It traces the literary war that has been waged by many writers to traverse the representation of woman in literature over a period of few centuries.

Keywords: Literature, Representation of woman, Social Change, Art and Propaganda

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Introduction:

Oh why did god,
Creator wise, that peopled highest heaven
With spirits masculine, create at last,
This novelty on earth, this fair defect of nature;
And not filled the world at once,
With men and angels, without feminine,
Or find some other way to generate mankind?

The most disheartening and the biggest irony of the world is that, woman, the progenitor has always been relegated to an inferior position in patriarchal societies. They were considered as "Second Sex" all over the world and were muzzled against all their afflictions. The tales of their woes are heart rending and of their struggle flutters one's conscience. Various means were adopted by the dominant sex to keep them submissive, such as, by manipulating social ideologies, on the premises of physical strength and through their representation as meek and subservient in religious, literary and political texts. In the above stated lines from the *Paradise Lost,* Eve has been damned as the cause for the fall of mankind. Such representations and accusations are not confined to one religion or country but almost all of them are tinged with this chauvinism. Hindu religion also inculcates such statements regarding the role of women in society. Although, in Ancient India, the Buddhist religion included women among disciples and treated them as equal to men, but later on, the laws prescribed for women by Manu were endorsed by Puranas. The term 'Shree Dharma' and 'Pathi Virtha Dharma' referred to the code of conduct and duties for women. Manu said that "a woman in childhood must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." The world of women has been defined by Tennyson in his poem "The Princess" as; " Man for the field and woman for the hearth,/ Man for the sword and for the needle she,/ Man to command and woman to obey./ All else confusion". Society ran on the same model for centuries and any diversion from it hailed storms on the fair sex. The most

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stringent rein has been thrown over the necks of Muslim women as it's religious teachings didn't consider women as even human beings. Muslim women have been intimated most by oppressing social and moral mores. From the very inception till death they see life from behind the veils and never utter or live for themselves. A slight deflection from this conduct results in severe death penalties. Few verses from the Muslim religious text *Quran* aptly enunciate the status ordained to Muslim women as "Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will…" "Marry women of your choice, two or three or four." A married woman for a Muslim man is not more than an object to have sex and to reproduce in whatever manner the man desires. This verse has sexual undertones as might be referring to the practice of anal discourse. The most threatening dictum of Muslim religion regarding female world is very well etched in yet another verse which states that "And if ye are unclean, purify yourselves. And if ye are sick or on a journey, or one of you cometh from the closet, or ye have had contact with women, and ye find not water, then go to clean, high ground and rub your faces and your hands with some of it."

Men are asked to absolve themselves with either dirt or water even after a casual contact with women. Till now Muslim women are not allowed to visit holy shrines and maintained that hell will break loose if any women will try to overrule it.

Whenever there is any war or contestation among two religions or groups, it has always been fought over the female bodies. Their bodies have been assigned the value of high dignity and ravaged to dishonor the rival group. The India Pakistan partition witnessed it in most vicious way. It showed that how women are most vulnerable and meek creatures who can be fed to male chauvinism and fanaticism in the easiest way. Agnes Flavia captures the atrocities abided by women during those horrendous days of segregation as;

> Their bodies mutilated and disfigured, their breast and genitalia tattooed and branded with triumphal slogans, their womb torn open, foetus killed, rampant raping, all this male savagery used the women body as an easy site to dishonor the other community (98).

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Such incidents of ghastliness against women are perennial in human history due to the concept of 'purity', 'chastity' and honor being incorrigibly trenchant in patriarchal society. Survivors from such brutality were rendered homeless, as all official rehabilitation programmes failed to convince people to accept the abducted women. Women were just puppets, strings to be pulled by father or brother pro marriage and by husband post marriage. They existed just to bear and rear children or existed just as wombs to procreate. They were considered as epitome of sacrifice and their chastity as their sole virtue. However, women are also highly venerated as deities but that fetters the other women into a straitjacketed pattern of life, designed to meet all the expectations of men. They have been asked every now and then to substantiate their chastity. It is just the tip of the iceberg because the exploitation of woman becomes even more acute with respect to class and caste. A woman from higher social strata enjoys some sort of liberties in comparison to those belonging to lower class as well as caste. They have been suppressed by multiple tyrants and merely eke out a living. Earlier they had no one to hear them groaning under plethora of miseries but got a potent weapon in the form of literary works to become audible even across boundaries of state and country. The predicament of a black woman from a lower class has been very well accentuated by Molara Ogundi Pe- leslie in her essay "African Woman, Culture and Another Development" as African woman is one:

> who is overburdened and oppressed because of six mountains on her back, oppression from outside in the form of colonialism and neo colonialism, the traditional patriarchal feudal structures of African Society, her backwardness due to lack of employment and education, man, who oppresses her, her color and race. She herself is her worst enemy because she is shackled by her negative self-image. (107)

Until women writers took up quill themselves they were negated in almost all spheres. The seeds of revolution were sown first by Mary Wollstonecraft in her essay "A Vindication of the rights of women" (1792). In it she advocated profoundly for the rights of women equal to men

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and education for women as the only saber to eradicate all sorts of irrationality from society. She condemns values associated with women as "Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison." She just ignited the flame but steadily the fire engulfed the whole world and now each and every issue related to women have been dealt with hard hands. The representation of women in literature altered with the turn of nineteenth century and the concept of new women prevailed. Writers like G.B Shaw and Henrik Ibsen startled the stage with productions like *Mrs.Warren's Profession* and *A Doll's House* respectively. Both the works distorted the representation of women as meek, submissive and dutybound. The protagonist Vivie of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is iconoclastic by discarding the ideals of traditional woman as self sacrificing, patient and to be dependent on man for all physical and financial needs. *Mrs Warren's Profession* has been labeled among 'Unpleasant Plays' of G.B Shaw because it deals with the unpleasant facts of society such as prostitution, marriage laws that trapped women, sordid living conditions of poor and the weight of such social mores which fetters women to the poles of a chaste, good and caring mother and loving wives. In this play, Mrs. Warren earns her living by prostitution after being worn out with menial jobs for just few pennies. With the character of Mrs. Warren, G.B Shaw battered a scathing attack on all hypocritical dogmas which echoed at the end of his novel *Cashel Byron's profession,* as "The word prostitution should either not be used at all, or else applied impartially to all persons who do things for money that they would not do if they had other assured means of livelihood". Shaw talked about such issues when women were contesting for rights to vote and such writings naturally would have strangulated the patriarchy and thus was banned. However, it stimulated others to muster up enough courage to jot down on the related issues. One such was Shaw's follower Henrik Ibsen. His Nora of *A Dolls's House* is a married counterpart to Vivie. Nora, having fully identified herself with traditional roles

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of a daughter, a wife and a mother brooded over her own existence when her husband rebuked her for petty matters. Nora's decision to forsake her family in the end startled the whole world to speculate over women's predicament. Nora's words at the end of the play became a manifesto of the female world for many years to come as she avers to her husband Torvald;

> I believe that before anything else I'm a human being- just as much as you are… or at any rate I shall try to become one. I know quite well that most people would agree with you, Torvald, and that you have warrant for it in books; but I can't be satisfied any longer with what most people say, and with what's in books. I must think things out for myself and try to understand them.

After Ibsen it became almost a trend to opine for women's cause and many female as well as male voices joined the stream. The other names who heralded a new era with their writings were Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet and many others. These feminist critics tried to analyze the images, stereotypes and misconceptions about women in literature as well as in social and political arena. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* shows how the power of writing can help women to gain their lost identities. Simone de Beauvoir's very famous *The Second Sex* examines each and every field associated with female world and stresses that how the perpetuation of certain myths augment women's sufferings. Showalter's *Towards a Feminist Poetics* traces the history of women's literature and the gradual shift in theme, style and subject from imitation to original writings.

Conclusion:

Women matched the pace with men after a long and persistent struggle of these female activists and writers, who opened new vistas to speculate and to create histories. They were the force to rupture the shackles of women and

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enable us to enjoy the various rights equal to men. Their writings altered the representation of women in traditional roles by presenting them as fighters, courageous and more importantly as individual beings. Their success even inspires the gay and lesbian people to strife for the rights of individuality. Adrienne Rich is light bearer for them and a new theory named as Queer theory is gaining firm hold in intellectual world. The achievements so far are immense but their practical applications are yet a dream in few regions. However, perceptions can be changed by portraying women in different roles such as advertisements and movies as the movie *Dangal* inspired many girls to opt career in wrestling. So, representation of women in literature as well in media helps in deciding as well as in altering their social roles.

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