

## Gender Issues in English Literature: A 21st Century Aspect

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### Abstract

There is no doubt that literature is a reflection of life and society. It faithfully reflects the day-to-day happening in one's life. The characters' experiences in the literary works are, no doubt, the experiences of ordinary individuals in society. Putting ourselves in place of the characters that we come across in literature, gives one the feeling and sense of what would we have done in that particular situation. The English literature has been divided according to different periods which reflect different environments and atmospheres. Like men, the position of women has also been a key concern in literary works. The situation of females has changed over time. From the time of the middle ages till the present time, there have been radical and drastic changes in the position of women. We can discuss the condition of a particular age that contributed a great deal to shaping the image of women as we can witness through various works written by both males and females from the Middle Ages, the age of Chaucer, the Elizabethan era, the Neo-classical era, Romantic age, Victorian age to the present modern and post-modern period.

**Keywords:** Ages, civilization, delineation, patriarchy, position, predicament, reflection

## 1. Introduction

It goes without saying that since the beginning of civilization, one can perceive a consistent struggle to liberate females from maledomination. Generally speaking, feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust and unequal behaviour meted out to any woman. In terms of literary interpretation, is referred to as any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of the female experience. Since the beginning of the society, the feminist has raised their voice to protest-economic, legal as well as social restrictions on the fundamental rights of women-have existed throughout history in different civilisations of the world. So, it is beyond doubt that the articulation of feminism finds a vital place, and its roots can be traced in the history of human civilizations.

## 2. Literature Review

The term 'feminism' is a diverse collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies largely inspired by or concerning the experiences of females, particularly regarding their socio-political and economic situation. As far as a social movement, feminism concentrates on limiting or eradicating gender inequality and encouraging women's rights, interests, and issues in society. Some feminists focus on documenting gender biases and changes in the social position and representation of women. On the other hand, some argue gender, and even sexist social constructs and research the construction of gender and sexuality, and thus, develop alternate models for studying social relations.

It is a fact that females form more than half of the human population, yet they are not considered equal to males in society. They have treated others, are the victims of oppression, and suppression and are marginalized based on sex and gender. For no mistake of their own, they suffer from the cradle to the grave and are not a part of the mainstream of society. People in the society think that they lack knowledge, skill and even basic human rights, as Ernestine (1851) observes in this regard:

Humanity recognizes no sex; the Mind recognises no sex; Life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. A woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him, she possesses physical, mental, and moral power. Like him (man) she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's law, and far greater penalties she has to suffer from ignorance... Like a man, she also enjoys or suffers from her country. Like men, a woman comes involuntarily into existence, yet she is not recognized as equal. (para. 2)

In a patriarchal society, women are supposed to play different roles. They are seen in a relationship with each other. They are treated as 'other' and 'secondary' endowed with the qualities of shyness, humility, selfishness, modesty, weakness and faithfulness. In this regard, Fergusson (1978) says: "in every age, women have been seen as mother, wife, mistress and as sex object-their roles in relationship with a man" (p. 38).

Etymologically speaking, the term 'feminism' has its origin in the Latin word 'Femina,' which means having the qualities of females. It is used concerning the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women's rights replacing womanism in the 1890s. According to Webster Dictionary, Feminism is defined as the doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights for women's movement for the attainment of such rights for women. According to Oxford Dictionary (1980), the term 'feminism' can be synonymous with the movement for recognition of the claims of women's request for rights (legal, political, etc.) equal to those possessed by men" (para. 3). The definition of feminism as we find in The Dictionnaire de Philosophie is "a position favourable to the rights of women" (para. 4). Troil Moi says in this connection: "the words 'feminist' and 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s.

In this way, after going through the various definitions of 'feminism' whatsoever may be the definition of 'feminism', in broader terms, refers to awareness of women's position and identity as well as their problems. The area of 'feminism' is not confined only to the advocacy of females' role in children's books, male sexual fantasy, politics, and anthropological studies of women. Besides, it also aims to analyze the reasons for the dimension of women's oppression and to achieve females' liberation.

Feminism is not a single idea, but an amalgamation of different pictures. In western countries, feminism has been, in terms of literary theories, a series of waves, and it has been divided into three waves. The term 'first wave feminism' was coined by Marshal Hear in 1968. Feminism involves the feminist activities of the late 19th century and early 20th century. The main focus of this concern was to bring equality for females and their suffrage rights. From the symbolic and political viewpoint, the feminists got found the right to vote, as essential. Under this right, the females will get full citizenship, and some functional changes are likely to ensure in their lives. In 1898s, people found that highly educated women were bereft of the right to vote, whereas illiterate women got were entitled to it.

Some feminists argued that a peaceful method of bringing changes in females' lives could not work effectively, and some violent means were necessary and should be adopted to get fruitful results. So, incidents like banging at politicians' doors and burning of letter boxes were responsible for the imprisonment of some suffragists. The First World War was responsible for the suspension of the campaign as Pankhurst (1981) remarked:

a man-made civilization, hideous and cruel in time of peace, is to be destroyed, and the war, she asserted, was God's vengeance upon the people who held women in subjection". In the book, *The Suffragette Movement*, she remarks: "men and women had been drawn closer together by the suffering and sacrifice of the war. Awed and humbled by the catastrophe, and by the huge economic problems, it had thrown into naked prominence; the women of the suffrage movement had learned that social degeneration is a long and mighty work. (p. 121)

Second Wave Feminism focuses primarily on the resurgence of female activity during the 1960s and 1970s, first in the United States, and later, in the Western world, when the protest against gender inequality in social, religious, and political fields was witnessed. The leading proponents of this phase include Simon de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan, who left an indelible impact on readers' minds.

The feminist activities from 1991 onwards till date are part and parcel of the Third Wave Feminism. The present period of feminism covers a solid and powerful reaction directed against the initiatives of the Second Wave of Feminism. It also considers many other factors, including colour, religion, race, culture, nationalities and ethnicities. The term was used for the first time by Rebecca Walker in 1992. The prime concern of the Third Wave Feminism was to change the traditional images of women. As a result of that, there was the formation of a slight different small group of females to discuss various issues and problems. In other words, it worked in the direction of consciousness-raising. Sarah Child used this term when the females would meet and discuss their own, personal experiences.

Consequently, Feminist literary theory came into emergence following the international women's movement. This movement gained momentum during the 20th century that focused on discussing the authors of the female work produced with the influence of society and the environment in their books. Several feminists and theorists are responsible for the growth of feminism in the arena of English literature. Mary Wollstonecraft is generally known as the 'first feminist' and well the 'mother of feminism'. Her essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, is a landmark achievement. This work reflects the feministic stance as she asserts that by utilizing education, the women can feel a sense of judgment and interpretation. Based on it, they can be at par with males, in society. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, the first book by Wollstonecraft in the form of a strong reaction to the education necessary for girls in which she focuses on the females' request, particularly the right to education. She thinks that only education can bring emancipation and enlightenment in their lives, which, further, strengthen the bond in their marriage life and relationships. Only equality in their marriage life is the key concern that will bring true freedom. Men and women can be accessible in the true sense of words in that situation only, and they will be dutiful to their responsibility to their family and state. In this way, we should treat female creatures of reason like males in society. In this connection, she asserts: "if the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of women, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test... who made men the exclusive judge, if women partake with him of the gift of reason".

She expresses with passion and enthusiasm how the females during her time were oppressed, marginalized, isolated, and uneducated in society. They are taught from their infancy that beauty is a women's sceptre, as, as a result, the mind shapes itself to the body and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. She was also a firm believer in universal education besides the education of the female in the male-dominated world. She writes in this regard: "men and women must be educated not to a great degree, by the opinions and manners of

the society they live in, and without any crucial change in society, there can be no real “revolution in female manners.”

It was in the 18th century England or what we say during the Romantic period, that some women writers came to the forefront. They produced excellent works which were earlier considered only the prerogative of the males in the society. Literature was not supposed to be written by females as they were entirely restricted to this domain, but with the emergence of Periodical Essay by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison that the issues and the problems of females started getting a reflection in literary works for the first time. That was the main reason for inspiration and encouragement for the females, and they also started writing some academic work during this period. There is no doubt in denying that the outlook of the females is essentially as well as entirely different from that of males.

Their works are complementary and supplementary to a man's works. Women have proved literary artists of the secondary order only. As poets, philosophers, and historians they have established, on the whole, inferior to men, says Compton Rickett, but in the art of fiction, they can undoubtedly claim equality. They can do so not because, under their femininity, they bring into certain prose qualities in which they excel and in which men are as a rule deficient.

In the eighteenth century, many female writers contributed a great deal to the development of English fiction. Before the growth and development of English novels in the 18th century, the fiction area was enriched considerably by Mrs Aphra Behn, Mrs Manley, and Mrs Haywood in the seventeenth century. Among these female writers, Henry Fielding's sister, Sarah Fielding, is worthy of detailed consideration. Her work, *The Adventures of David Simplewes* much to Richardson than to the author of *Tom Jones*. Sarah Fielding's works are full of the gift of painting characters in the same style as Richardson.

Hanna More, a crucial female novelist, is also known for her work, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, which is full of satirical overtone. It has been written from the feminist point of view, a trait that was later adopted, Fanny Burney. Before the advent of Jane Austen on the literary scene, Fanny Burney is one of the renowned and critical female authors. In her works and personality, she was endowed with a gift of caricature. One critic has rightly called her “Smollett in petticoats” as she reflects some of Smollett's inventiveness and her quick eyes for the salient features that betray her character. But, no doubt, she lacks the coarseness and violence in Smollett's works.

In her works, she writes about picaresque adventures employing comedy of manners. She has attempted to define part of the heritage of Richardson with that of Henry Fielding. Among the most recurrent themes dealt with by Burney is a young girl's impression of the social world, the follies committed by her, and finally, the gradual discovery of its values. Her chief strength in her works lies in her social comedy, and her works are the feminine representative of what we find in the case of Henry Fielding. David Cecil has rightly summed up the crux of Burney's novels as the lady's entry into English fiction. She was perhaps the first female author to translate the Fielding type of novel into the feminine key.

Burney's fame as a female author chiefly rests upon her masterpiece, *Evelina*, a famous story with a female protagonist written in an epistolary manner. The present work recounts the gradual progress of the heroine's mind, her hesitation, doubts, and agonies. The heroine's experiences in this work are an exposure to the manners from the females' point of view. Before her writing novel in English literature, the story of technique was popular among the male writers.

Burney's novel, *Evelina*, which was a successful one by her as a work of art, encouraged her to produce another work, *Cecilia*, or *The Manner of Heiress*. She delineates a fashionable world with minute details. The characters in *Evelina*, which are merely representative, turn into a type in the novel. *Cecilia* is an essential and significant contribution before the French Revolution in which the writer deals with the absurdities of the society from females' point of view. In this work, one finds Burney's delicacy of satire and her accurate observation. In this way, Jane Austen was indebted to Fanny Burney.

Maria Edgeworth as a female writer of the eighteenth century contributed to the development of fiction writing. She acts as a bridge or rallying point between Fanny Burney and Jane Austen and W.M. Thackeray. Among the chief traits of her fictional writings are wit, learning, experiences of social life as well, and the proper understanding of human motive, behavior and conduct.

Her works also reflect great vivacity, more genial breadth than Fanny Burney, but less delicacy of touch than the older novelists of manners. She throws light on the Irish life in which she deals with the realistic Irish men. Her perfect portrayal of Irish life in her works was the source of inspiration for Walter Scott, who meticulously and skillfully dealt with Scottish life in his works. We can divide her novels into two broad groups: London social life, and the humorous, but uneasy relationships between the Irish landlord and the peasantry. She is a pioneer in both types of works-the novel, *The Absentee* deals with the first group, whereas *Castle Rackrent* deals with the second category that represents Irish peasantry with its racy style. Susan Ferrier also practiced the novel in this period. Among the books of manners include her notable works: *Marriage*, *The Inheritance*, and *Destiny*. She deals with the Scottish life in her works perfectly as Edgeworth vividly depicted the Irish life in her works. She shares ground with Maria Edgeworth on different concepts-humour, observation, and earnest didacticism, but Ferrier's works have more variety than Maria Edgeworth's.

Miss Mary Russell Mitford is another prominent and significant female novelist of the age. In her works, we witness the beautiful sketches of rural life imbued with delicate humour coupled with the unmistakable feminine portrayal throughout her career as a novelist. She is primarily known for her work, *The Village*, which projects the beautiful scenes of nature besides the careful delineation of her portraits. Her work, *Recollection of Literary Life*, is also a memorable and vital contribution as a female author. Mrs Ann Radcliffe also belongs to the category of critical female writers of the age. She was a gothic novelist, and as a female author,

her works occupy a towering and dominating place in the history of English literature. She is primarily known for her two masterpieces- *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *The Italian*. In her works, she applies the machinery of horror and terror along with the supernatural elements.

During the Victorian Age in nineteenth-century England, the situation of females was deplorable as they were within the four walls of their houses. They were not supposed to get an education, and higher education mainly was a daydream for them. Females, as authors, were also not accepted by the patriarchal norms of society. Even then, we come across a galaxy of female authors during the nineteenth century in English literature. Women authors were occupying the central stage during the Victorian period. Robert Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a versatile poet. The readers admire her poetry because of her critical opinions.

Her best work is to be found in *Sonnet from Portuguese* where she expresses her love for Robert Browning. Her work, *Aurora Leigh* is a fragment of spiritual autobiography; it is a significant work of its intimate revelation of her nature, temperament, and outlook.

Besides that, the poetry of Christina Rossetti, the sister of D.G. Rossetti, is also worthy of detailed consideration. She kept the spirit of simplicity, transparency and spontaneity advocated by other Pre-Raphaelite writers. She is, at heart, a religious poet as she deals with the religious themes with transparent clarity of tone and language, and a great variety of metric and melodic effects. Her significant works comprise *Goblin Market*, *A Pageant and Other Poems*, *Time Flies*, *Verses and Songs*, and *New Poems*. Her poem, *The Prince's Progress* is an allegorical narrative poem that is serious in tone and more comprehensive in meaning. She emerges as an ascetic in her attitude who advocates renunciation of worldly pleasures. Though sadness and depression are the recurrent themes in her poetry, her work is not oppressive. She shows her fascination for supernaturalism and the Middle Ages in a simple and direct style.

Like Charles Dickens, Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell emerged as a social reformer among Victorian authors as a female writer of the Victorian Age. Her early works, *Mary Barton*, and *North and South* deal with industrial life in which she speaks for the ameliorating of the oppressed people. We can perceive a note of sympathy running through her works, but her works do not preach any solution to the predicaments of the working-class people. She also dealt with the psycho-analytic study of her heroines. She makes an intelligent and close study of female protagonists, as is evident through her work *Cranford*. Her work *Ruth* is a powerful exploration of the ethical and moral subjects. The protagonist of *Ruth* is the victim of an oppressive environment left to die by her lover. Mrs Gaskell writes about the elimination of the social problems in society.

The problem faced by the Bronte sisters was tremendous for the writers because they did not find a publisher to publish their works. The reason behind it was that they were females, but their contribution as female authors was of great significance and worth. Charlotte Bronte is primarily known for her four works- *Professor*, *The Vilette*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Shirley*. But, her fame as a female author chiefly rests upon *Jane Eyre*, a novel written in an autobiographical mode. She is primarily known for her passion for exploration, plot construction, and imaginative

ability. Emily Bronte touched the heights of name and fame with her novel, *Wuthering Heights*, which is a passionate expression of her artistic candour. Anne Bronte wrote two important books, *Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which speak volumes about her as a female writer. During the Victorian period, the Bronte sisters are generally known as the 'stormy sisterhood' whose contribution as a novelist in the nineteenth century is praiseworthy.

George Eliot is perhaps the most renowned and distinguished female novelist of the nineteenth century. Her works are full of the psychological penetration of her heroines. A close and minute analysis of her heroines reveals her as one of the first female writers to give an intellectual direction to the English novel during the Victorian Age. Among the most famous works can be included *Scenes from Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*, which are full of realistic details of the Victorian life. Through these works, she emerges as a moralist, and pathos and humour enrich the texture of the fictional works.

During the twentieth century, many authors contributed a great deal in the field of English literature the contribution of the female author in the twentieth century, is a worthy and significant fact he was the culminating point of the production of literary outputs by the females in various parts of the world.

*In the twentieth century, among the prominent female authors, the name of Virginia Woolf is at the top. In the literature written in the twentieth century, one can witness a perfect differentiation of quality of academic works based on gender and sex. It was also a time when the feministic aspect was seen as a dominating literary topic of many writers. The aesthetic movement of the late Victorian age proved a boon for female authors. The feminist literature was the product of the cultural subservience to a man tradition. To portray the female psyche, Virginia Woolf took recourse to the stream of consciousness technique. Her works *A Room of One's Own*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse* are the best specimen of this technique.*

Among the other notable female authors of the twentieth century can be included Dorothy Richardson and Katherine Mansfield, their contributions to feminism cannot be underestimated and overlooked. Dorothy Richardson was a British author and journalist. Her name can be among those female authors who contributed mainly to the modernist novel where she employed stream of consciousness technique as a narrative strategy. Her best work is *Pilgrimage*, published between 1915-1967 in 13 semi-autobiographical novels. The female experiences form the central part of her works. Besides, she also contributed to the language-wariness of language conventions, her blending of the normal rules of punctuation coupled with sentence structure has been used to formulate feminine prose which, in the words of Richardson, is necessary for the expression of female experiences.

Katherine Mansfield, a renowned shortstory writer, also earned worldwide fame as a female author in the twentieth century. Among the most recurring themes of her shortstories and poetry are anxiety, sexuality, and existentialism, some of the typical modernist traits. Born in New Zealand, she settled in England and was in close contact with some modernist female authors of the time. Her collection of shortstories, *Bliss and Other Stories*, *The Daughter of the*



Late Colonel, and *The Garden Party and Other Stories* was highly acclaimed and received a good response from all over the world. Her contribution to the field of feminism is worthy of detailed consideration as she focused on the problems and predicaments of women in society.

In the twentieth century, there was also a galaxy of female authors in the Indian Writing in English in which the names of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, and Bharati Mukherjee are some notable female authors. In their works, the female issues are the focal points of their plots. Like the female authors from various Western countries, the Indian female authors can also be recognized for their talent, and the art of writing is an asset to the entire universe. At the national as well as regional levels, the Indian female writers like Rama Mehta, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, and Kamala Markandaya have explored their feministic stances in their works very effectively.

In the 21st century also, the female authors in Indian Writing in English are touching new heights of glory. They are making Indian literature as popular as the literature of other countries. Among the 21st century female writers who brought Indian literature to new heights can be included Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, and Kiran Desai. Their works are full of postmodernist aspects in the true sense of words.

Arundhati Roy, a Booker prize winner for her novel, *The God of Small Things*, produced her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as a revolutionary work in the 21st century. This work is an amalgamation of gender issues and political aspects. As a social activist and social reformer, Roy's main focus in this work is on politics and gender issues. Her main concern in the novel incorporates the eunuchs who are none regarded in harmony with society's expectations.

The males never consider females a part and parcel of the mainstream of society. They exist in a male body with women's feelings. That is why they suffer from the question of Identity crisis focused on the traditional relationship between men and women. She has presented the Indian society as a male-dominated society where all consider the female a slave to male members. The females in the society still suffer as they live a life of alienation and isolation. They are still harassed and raped miserably and are deprived of equal rights and opportunities without their identity in society.

Kiran Desai, the winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, opened the new avenues in the Indian Writing in English with her second book, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The present novel portrays beautifully how the female authors, even in the 21st century, are constantly preoccupied with the issue of marginalization in the lives of females. The diverse aspects of feminism- alienation, identity crisis, insurgency, and globalization are the critical concerns of Kiran Desai's present book.

This work is a powerful exploration of poverty repeating itself from one generation to another. This work throws light on Desai's portrayal of the position of females in society through the subjugation and repression of Nimi, one of the female characters in the novel. On the contrary, through the character of Sai, Desai presents the picture of the liberated females who are competent enough and can work with equal potential to males. She falsifies Tennyson's concept of females' subjugation when he says

Men for the field and women for the heath  
Man for sword and for the needle she

The main concern of Kiran Desai's work, *The Inheritance of Loss*, is to break the shackles of the age-old long silence in the 21st century. Her female characters are engaged with their quest for identity breaking the traditional restrictions which women face in the male chauvinistic world. Except for a few female figures, she has delineated her female characters with good possibility and potential as they can carve new identities of their own. One can witness in Desai's work how a female voice reverberates vividly, and she defends those who cannot speak for themselves.

In the 21st century, Shashi Deshpande's works are a painful reflection of her intense craving for freedom and individuality in the patriarchal setup. She deals with the idea of women's emancipation. Her female characters are generally torn between tradition and modernity in the 21st century. They face trials and tribulations as they are the victims of oppression and suppression in the male-dominated world. There is no doubt that her works offer fresh insight for critical analysis linking literature with actual life situations.

Her novel, *The Binding Vine*, written in the 21st century, explores the issue of marital rape, which has not been the subject matter of any of the female novelists in Indian Writing in English. It also throws light on those females who are the victims of males' lust and females' helplessness. Her next novel, *A Matter of Time*, is in the form of self-confession, having the main concern quite different from her earlier works. She deals with a story from the male characters' point of view.

Deshpande's female characters are highly conscious of their problems and sufferings as the victims of inequality but operate within the male-dominated framework where the females are supposed to live in a tradition-bound society. The female protagonists in her works generally belong to the middle-class community.

### 3. Conclusion

In this way, after making a close and minute study of the females' position in English literature, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that it has undergone different changes. At present, no doubt, the women are enjoying a privileged position in the social set-up, but still, it is not very convincing and satisfactory. The example of Malala Yousafzai as the youngest female author, who received the Nobel Prize, reflects the competence and calibre of the females. Besides, in 2013, her name was also recommended by the world's most influential people. But, still, we have to go a long way long for the complete emancipation of females in the society, and then and only then, the concept of female empowerment and emancipation will be justified fully.

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